Beyond International Intervention

POLITICS OF IMPROVEMENT IN SERBIA

Katarina Kušić

Beyond International Intervention

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Politics of Improvement in Serbia

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For my dad

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Series Editor's Foreword

In *Beyond International Intervention*, Katarina Kušić has produced a trenchant rethinking of the very concept of "intervention," and she has done so by paying close attention to how the people at whom international interventions are aimed actually experience and make sense of those efforts. Unlike so much of the literature—even the critical literature—on international interventions, Kušić is less concerned to document deleterious effects of well-meaning international actors (although such effects, and the gap between the intention and the reception of governance, are certainly not absent from her account) than she is to disclose the tacit assumptions at the core of "intervention" itself: the concrete production of liberal-individual subjects, and the "improvement" of their lives through the introduction of an external perspective into a local setting. Indeed, her argument calls on us to foreground improvement, rather than "intervention," as we think through what actually happens when international actors set up shop in a country with the intention of helping to build state capacity and establish a durable peace.

The trick here—and this is what makes Kušić's account a configurational one—is that the very concept of intervention both shapes how international actors (and the scholars who all too often adopt their point of view as their own) view and engage with local people, and plays only a partial role in how those local people make sense of this engagement. Kušić's ethnographic sensibility allows her to recover the understandings of local people in ways that defy the conceptual boundaries of intervention. Local people are not simply incompletely socialized or individuated liberal subjects, and they do not operate with the same conceptual framework as the international actors with whom they interact. "Local knowledge," in this sense, is not just a set of idiosyncratic factors that have to be taken into account in order for an intervention to succeed; it is instead a way of living that often contests the

very presumptions that international actors bring with them. All of which is to say that there is a politics involved here, and not just an administrative procedure of "listening to the local people" only long enough to find the obstacles to the smooth functioning of liberal peacebuilding efforts.

It is crucial to Kušić's analysis that she is not engaging in the problem-solving exercise of making international interventions better or more effective. Instead, by carefully reconstructing the conceptual vocabulary of both international actors and the local people who are the object of their efforts, she opens up the very question of what "effective" might mean when it comes to such engagements. A focus on the politics of improvement does not offer us an ex ante definition of "improvement" as much as it urges us to ask the question about how "improvement" is understood, and by whom. The gap between intention and reception shows us the limitations of adopting the point of view of the (liberal) governor, precisely insofar as the seamlessness of idealized liberal governance is an ideal rather than an empirically accurate description. Local people may resist governance efforts precisely because they bring a different understanding of "improvement" to the table, and that difference deserves to be given voice as we seek to explain international interventions. It is the particular configuration of the international-liberal and the local in a given case that explains what we actually see on the ground, and that is what Kušić is pointing us towards.

The result is an important intervention into debates about liberal governance, peacebuilding, and political subjectivity writ large—grounded in careful empirics from an important case. It is a fitting addition to the series and I am pleased that we are able to publish it.

Patrick Thaddeus Jackson

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Abbreviations

BCMS	Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, Serbian
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CSO	civil society organisation
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FDI	foreign direct investment
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
IPARD	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance for Rural Development
IR	international relations
NCEU	National Convention on the European Union
NFE	non-formal youth education
NPZM	National Programme for the Employment of Youth
SAA	Stabilisation and Association Agreement
SNS	Srpska napredna stranka (Serbian Progressive Party)

Introduction

At the start of my field research, I travelled to Istanbul to attend a week-long workshop for youth from Yugoslavia's successor states under the name Youth for Peace.[1] This small peacebuilding intervention sought to deal with both the legacy and causes of the 1990s wars that followed the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The event's goal was seemingly simple: to "raise the future leaders who are respectful towards diversity."[2] I was there because I was interested in how these "soft" international interventions, where there is no military and no coercion, are experienced by participants. The specific project in Istanbul was an international effort between a Turkish and a British university, and it specifically targeted young people that I focussed on. I was also eligible for participation as a young person "affected by war."

The Youth for Peace event is held every year at the same university in Turkey. It aims to showcase "pioneering work in a new age of conflict resolution" and traces its origin to "the idea of dissecting the roots of prejudice and bringing together communities, that have historically experienced conflict from regional dynamics." In 2015, it focussed on the theme "What Happened to Yugoslavia?" Participation was limited to young people between twenty and thirty years of age from former Yugoslav republics, and it specifically targeted "candidates that have first-hand been *affected by the conflict* or have close family that has experienced the war." The one-day conference invited renowned experts on the region and was followed by a three-day conflict resolution workshop led by Dr. Ben Howard, a UK-based conflict resolution expert.

1. All persons, events, and organisations in the book have been anonymised.
2. All quotations here are from the "Call for Applications" for Youth for Peace. I do not provide a link to ensure anonymity.

The workshop embodied the types of interventions that this book studies. Its transformations are supposed to arrive from the bottom up by accomplishing seemingly modest goals like individual reconciliation and personal development. But despite their micro-targets and humble means, these interventions are paradoxically ambitious—while the five days in Istanbul with ordinary youth might seem banal, the aim was nothing less than helping regional transformation towards peace imagined as democracy and market liberalisation.

These types of encounters stand in contrast to the more orthodox understanding of international intervention as a coercive interference that has as its aim the prevention of atrocities. As the Youth for Peace week shows, both scholarship and practice have significantly expanded the definition of intervention in the last few decades. Today interventions involve a variety of acts and goals: they build peace, states, democracies, and economic development with tools ranging from political conditionality to personal skill building. They are less "direct" and more difficult to define (Schroeder 2018). And, as we shall see, these transformations are meant to begin from the participants themselves.

While the most obvious objective of Youth for Peace was moving beyond conflict by educating a new generation of leaders, the workshop also had therapeutic and self-improvement elements. It specifically invited young people who were "personally affected by the conflict to share their experience and help with analysing the conflict and overcoming it through the Workshop." We were further enticed by a combination of "inspiring speeches, panel discussions as well as entrepreneurial talks" to be held at the conference. Moreover, the three-day workshop was facilitated by Dr. Howard, who was to "mentor young leaders coming from former Yugoslav countries." These young leaders, with the help of Dr. Howard, were to "engage in an interactive, intensive workshop aiming to overcome the dimensions of prejudice currently entrenched in regional dynamics." We were obviously doing multiple things at the same time: overcoming the prejudice and conflict that we carry as a birthright from our "post-conflict" countries (it was unclear whether this prejudice was the cause or the outcome of the 1990s wars), building entrepreneurial skills and the networks that would enable us to use them, and becoming "future leaders who are respectful towards diversity."

Interventions entail a wide range of practices, mostly of various Western or Northern organisations and their partners undertaking an array of projects and programmes to produce, or fund the production of, peace, democracy, and development through political, economic, and social engineering around the world.[3] Along with the wide-ranging practices of intervention,

3. Throughout the book, I refer to power centres as "the West," even though I am aware of

scholars have also inherited a specific way of thinking about statebuilding and peacebuilding interventions in world politics: we think of them as meeting points of international and local actors and ideas, as projects unfolding in particular fields of action, and we use liberalism as a benchmark of their successes and failures. Agents are understood to be "someone else" than those who are supposed to reap the benefits of the intervention. This difference is usually understood in terms of states: the intervener is either a foreign power or the "international community." Even when the transformation is supposed to be happening at the level of local actors, as during Youth for Peace, it is the international community that needs to act as a catalyst for the desired change. Intervention is also seen as unfolding through specific acts ordered within predefined fields of action and time. Therefore, most intervention studies, including my fieldwork in Istanbul, rely on specific programmes implemented by the international actors described above. And finally, these projects seemingly have as their goal the promotion of liberalism itself. Even though the idea of intervention as a coherent liberal programme is contested, there is a wide understanding that such an idea exists.

Youth for Peace presents one such international intervention. It is imagined as an international effort to change local circumstances, as an act it is confined to one week, and its specified outcomes should contribute to a liberal transformation of the region. Yet it is offered without coercion, involves ordinary people, and it is relatively modest in scope when compared to NATO bombings or organised UN peacekeeping missions.

Alongside an understanding of intervention as a particular constellation of agents, acts, and aims, the last two decades have seen the emergence of a consensus around the importance of including local actors, marginalised histories, and subjects commonly erased from knowledge production. Whether through the well-established "local turn" or more recent decolonial approaches to intervention, both scholars and practitioners are increasingly working to incorporate local subjects and histories in their analyses. And, perhaps surprising considering the consensus that surrounds this issue, efforts to include local perspectives are often evaluated as having failed.

This book builds upon this work. It starts from a problem that is both conceptual and meta-methodological: How can we rethink international intervention from the perspective of the targets, or subjects, of intervention? In answering this question, I focus on a tension thus far overlooked: that an engagement with different subjects might not only help us understand inter-

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more complicated topographies of power that prevent simple geographical division. I do so to reference those countries that are usually seen as having the will and the skill to intervene, and since in Serbia they are termed "the West," I also keep this formulation.

vention better, but also move us beyond its conceptual confines. Specifically, I argue that even though an understanding of intervention through specific agents, acts, and aims produced valuable insights into the dynamics and effects of liberal interventionism, we are faced with its limits when we try to engage lived experiences in areas of intervention. The concept of intervention itself is underwritten by assumptions that prevent both scholars and practitioners from coeval engagement with people living in areas of intervention. Such engagement, therefore, requires moving beyond and outside the conceptual parameters of intervention.

The book begins by studying intervention from the experiences of people in two policy areas of "soft" interventionism: young people learning about democracy, politics, and human rights in non-formal education events, and people affected by the transformation of agricultural governance in Serbia. Following these experiences, however, moves us beyond intervention itself and leads into contemplating the complex politics that people navigate within and outside intervention—how international politics descend into everyday lives, and how global power is made by individual decisions and dispositions. I suggest that these processes are not exclusive to "post-conflict," "non-Western," or "post-socialist" spaces, and instead form a politics of improvement that structures power in diverse locations.

While these arguments unfold across the following seven chapters, I use the introduction to illustrate how I arrived at the problem of thinking about "targets" of intervention as political subjects beyond the conceptual confines of intervention, how I approached the problem methodologically, and what the relevance of intervention as an analytical confinement is for the wider study of international politics.

Intent: Intervention, Governmentality and the Local

There is a striking idiosyncrasy in the temporal imagination of the goals of the Youth for Peace workshop—we are there because we are *already* the solution, but we are also imagined as needing to undertake a transformation to be able to *become* that solution.[4] In this transformation, we are supposed to shed the shackles of "entrenched prejudice" and become the leaders that we appeared to already be in our application forms. We were at the same time treated as both the *cause* and the *cure* to the quagmire of the 1990s

4. For more on the temporal peculiarities of programmes that seek to empower youth, see Eliasoph 2011.

wars. In addition to this curious conception of our agency in peace-making, the workshop mixed in narratives of entrepreneurship, contacts, networking, and skills that would enhance our personal prospects. In the "Call for Applications," peace seemed to arrive with entrepreneurship, progress with competition in the market, and the "good life" in the Balkans with embracing ideals that are seemingly universal.

In the introductory session of our workshop in Istanbul, people listed differing reasons for participation: gaining skills, a free holiday, learning about different historical perspectives that notoriously diverge in the region's history textbooks, making friends and contacts, exchanging knowledge and ideas, developing CVs. In itself, this was not surprising. The notorious "lack of opportunities" in the region and the deteriorating economic situation made both travelling and experiencing new styles of education an exciting prospect. While unsurprising, the variety of the organisers' aims and the participants' motivations points to a more general bewilderment around the goals of the comprehensive project that flew us all to a mini-holiday in Istanbul.

In my notes after the workshop, I paraphrased the conclusion of our closing discussion—"What is the point?" Is it to learn "what happened to Yugoslavia?" and reach some objective truth that should guard against repeating the past? Is it to think about how not to let it happen again? Are we aiming for skills-building for our professional careers to tap into the popular connection between economic development and peace? Is it skills for civil society, the regional dear of international donors, that we are supposed to develop and thus "build capacity"? Or are we there to holiday in Turkey?

In these projects, it has by now become common sense to focus on local individuals (in this case, the thirty young people that travelled to Istanbul) as both the cause and the cure of the problem at hand. The problem, it has become obvious, cannot be easily pinpointed. Any peace effort must be supported by economic strengthening, any economic programme must consider social characteristics, and every project must be both accepted and enacted by the individuals themselves. Hence the simultaneously specific and general goals of the Youth for Peace programme. We will share our experiences and heal, we will gain skills and become economically empowered, we will learn to be more open, and we will thus save our region—economically, socially, and politically. Without us, there can simply be no change.

The idea of empowering individuals to take change in their own hands captures what is now known in the literature as the "local turn." As top-down interventions proved unsustainable and often had negative effects, the local turn emerged with an alternative model. If interventions failed

because the interveners lacked the authority and cultural sensitivity to successfully intervene, why not give ownership to those who already have the required social capital, legitimacy, and context-specific knowledge (Kappler 2015; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; Richmond 2013)? Hence, ideas like participation, empowerment, local ownership, and an overall valorisation of the local came to be. The job of the interveners in Istanbul was to "help us help ourselves."

Besides shifting the conceptualisation of agency away from the international and onto the local, this also implies a more general change in the rationality that guides intervention. The week in Istanbul was not to only teach us new skills, but to enact a transformation in how we related to ourselves and those around us—it sought to shape us as subjects, to affect subjectivity. This explains the wide array of goals, which ranged from helping us overcome personal trauma to offering entrepreneurial and business skills: if we thoroughly changed as people, every aspect of the social life that we made would accordingly transform. It thus becomes hard to separate practices of peacebuilding, statebuilding, democracy promotion, and development. The expansion of goals and tools to achieve them necessarily blurs the lines between different projects that seek to improve the lives of whole populations (Siani-Davies 2003; Williams 2013; Woodward 2013).

This all-encompassing transformation opens up interventions to be considered as the pursuit of a particular form of government in the Foucauldian sense—a concern with life itself that transcends the boundaries between social, political, and economic spheres, examined around the concept of governmentality (Foucault 2007; 2008). "To govern" means to be responsible for every aspect of life: welfare, happiness, health, etc. (Foucault 1991, 89–99). The concept of governmentality makes it easier to understand how the Istanbul event was concerned with such varied aspects of our lives, like mental health, personal values, business skills, and career prospects. It was a small illustration of what it means to seek to *govern* life as a whole. Governmentality sheds light on government as a production of particular subjectivities.

This not only implies the expansion of the fields of government, but also specifically makes sense of how individuals govern themselves. Power here is not coercive, but has a productive effect that creates subjects within the matrices of permissible actions and thought. In its famous formulation, governmentality is a form of government concerned with the "conduct of conduct" (Gordon 1991, 2). Governmentality as a form of rule raises two issues that will be pursued throughout this book. First, governmentality launches a *critique* of (neo)liberalism and interrogates how seemingly emancipatory

projects are not always solutions to contemporary problems, but particular strategies of government. From this perspective, then, while all action might not be bad, it is nevertheless dangerous (Foucault 1983). Second, governmentality is ultimately interested in the relationship between capitalism and forms of rule, as it was developed by Foucault to specifically examine the rise of liberal rule and its transformation under market rationality to neoliberalism. Although Foucault wrote against his Marxist contemporaries and their reliance on economic determinism, *neoliberal* governmentality is very much based on a market rationality that governs conduct.[5] This market rationality becomes crucial in the way we relate to ourselves and others in competitive terms (Dardot and Laval 2013). Yet these personal, subjective relations—the economisation of life—are also defining features of common political life.[6] In the words of Wendy Brown (2015), the demos itself is being undone by this neoliberal reason, which replaces the political logic of liberal democracy with an economic one. The lens provided by the concept of governmentality thus helps us to probe the boundaries between the economic and the political, as it understands neoliberalism to be a "multi-vocal and contradictory phenomenon" that is both "a political discourse about the nature of rule and a set of practices that facilitate government of individuals from a distance" (Larner 2000, 21, 6).

This leads to a specific critique of the local turn that uncovers how the focus on individuals, rather than institutions, is a more subtle and vastly more intrusive tool of intervention. Instead of targeting institutions and structures that might bring economic growth and peace, these interventions focus on the individual behaviours, values, and thoughts of the people who they are supposed to be helping (see Duffield 2001). The nurturing and empowerment intended by projects like the one in Istanbul are far from the emancipation and freedom of liberal theory: they guide subjects to voluntarily fit their lives into preconceived ideas about what freedom is. In other words, power is still here, but it is a more sophisticated form of liberal discipline that uses the subject's sense of self, rather than institutions, to govern them. Rather than bringing about emancipation, these interventions become a governmental technique that relocates discussion from the political issues of distribution and power to matters of individual behaviour. Intervention thus becomes a part of what James Ferguson (1994) has famously

5. I draw on three lectures (Four, Five, and Six) from *Birth of Biopolitics* (Foucault 2008) that define the move from liberalism to neoliberalism.

6. Economisation here does not automatically imply monetisation—different spheres of life (like family, education, or relationships) are not necessarily monetised, but they are subjected to the model of the market (W. Brown 2015, 31).

termed the anti-politics machine. Using governmentality to examine these projects allows us to see and better appreciate interventions that blur the lines between economy, society, and politics.

Reading that first encounter of my fieldwork alongside governmentality literature uncovers important dynamics of projects of peace and development. The agency of change is attached firmly to local subjectivities, while the change itself implies transformation in how those subjectivities make the social, political, and economic landscape of the region. Governmentality helps us pry open the subtle techniques that are seemingly devoid of coercive power and function with praiseworthy ideals of emancipation, empowerment, and ownership. It is these governmentalised individuals, supposedly being emancipated, transformed, and empowered, whom the following pages focus on. This approach leads to some of the questions that will be subsequently tackled: How are local subjects imagined? How is their transformation supposed to happen? What kind of people are they supposed to become, and why? Through which practices is the transformation encouraged?

However, my questions do not stop there. Noticeably, all the above questions are oriented towards the governing *intent*—they probe the rationalities of these projects and ask how the projects are imagined, advertised, and rationalised. These questions are a part of a particular way of thinking about interventions that is still dominant in both practice and scholarly analysis: we are mostly concerned with those doing the intervening, rather than those intervened upon (Sabaratnam 2011a; 2013; 2017). Put simply, in the efforts to unearth the violence committed by (neo)liberal ideologies and global capitalism that are seen to underpin much of liberal interventionism, critiques once more erase local subjecthood under the weight of political economy or powerful discourses of liberal peace. Subjects become mere "mute objects or data points" (Sabaratnam 2017, 17).

While Chapter 1 will further discuss these omissions and relate them to larger erasures of non-Western experiences in international relations (IR) (Blaney and Tickner 2017; Hutchings 2011; Sabaratnam 2013), for now it is enough to point out the widely shared critique: there are no Bosnians in David Chandler's (2006) critique of the European Union's involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina; there are no subjects in Milja Kurki's (2011) interpretation of EU democracy promotion as governmentality; and the sociological turn in intervention scholarship (Goetze 2017) refers to the sociology of *the interveners*, not those *intervened upon*. What this orientation misses, and what became obvious during my time in Istanbul, is the difference between the *intent* and the *reception* of these governing practices. They

are intimately connected, but vastly different.[7] Studying how these projects are received requires paying particular attention to the subjects imagined to be reaping the benefits of intervention.

Reception: Beyond the Local and Governmentality

On the last day of the Youth for Peace week, we were unexpectedly told that we would participate in something called "Empathy Studio: One Question Workshop." One of the facilitators started by saying that "there was an elephant in the room during the week." We looked at each other confusedly—we had been sharing rooms, meals, transport, exhaustion, and excitement all week, and we did not think it likely that we had missed anything. Yet the facilitator spoke with confidence as she told us that we would be put in pairs (always from different countries) and allowed to ask one question to each other. She elaborated: "There's an elephant in the room that you've avoided the whole time. Now you'll have the opportunity to ask the question that is the elephant in the room." The instructions were short, but thorough: "We count on you to exercise some self-censorship and not let things get out of control"; "There will be no discussion, you can discuss all day after the workshop"; "You will be filmed, if you prefer your face not to be filmed, we will film your hands and feet."[8]

Examining the intent of the "Empathy Studio" would allow me to analyse it as a "psychosocial intervention" that judges "the domestic populations dysfunctional" and "the international rescue interventions as functional" (Hughes and Pupavac 2005, 873). It would also point to the local's ambiguous position as both the problem and the solution. We bring an elephant into the room that only we can get rid of. Governmentality sheds light on how we are not coerced into new behaviour patterns but nurtured into developing them ourselves, through self-reflection and devising new ways of seeing ourselves and our relations to others.

The critique voiced by my colleagues at the workshop was different. If the goal of the workshop was to create a group, the collective anger that this announcement provoked proved that we had become one. The dissatisfaction was expressed communally, and everyone's complaints were supported by this group dynamic. Engagement with different subjects—my colleagues

7. I borrow the analytical distinction between intent and reception from Julie Hemment's (2015) work on youth politics in Russia.

8. All quotations in this section are from my fieldwork journal.

in the workshop—not only gave me answers, but also changed the questions I paid attention to.

The idea of the local as separated from the logics of governing was challenged when participants who studied psychology emphasised that it is dangerous to uncover possible traumas and then not offer the time or the expertise to deal with them. For a moment, the binary dynamic of the unskilled local helped by international experts was overturned. The conceptualisation of us as beneficiaries was questioned. Participants protested that "they did not apply for a "healing process"" and compared the exercise to "rehab programmes" that they found insulting.[9] The economic rationalities were both practised and resisted. Some denounced them, as they refused to be used as marketing props. At the same time, others looked forward to adding the resulting video as a line in their entrepreneurial CVs. Moreover, the ways that we were imagined as "Balkan subjects" of peacebuilding were probed: Did they assume that we spent a week together while secretly hating each other? Did they expect us to attack each other if only given a chance? Someone summarised the feeling: "I don't think that we have been dealing with the Balkans, but with the *discourse* on the Balkans. None of us feel very Balkan."[10] The comment captures the problem well. It was obvious that the images of the local and the design for its transformation were present, but none of us felt very local.

These challenges require thinking further about the place of the local in intervention and how governmentality helps us understand it. A rich literature has already uncovered the problematic uses of the local: it is binary, essentialist, static, depoliticised and romanticised; and it serves as an apologia for the failures of interventions (among many others, see Randazzo 2017; Bargués-Pedreny 2018). While these issues are further pursued in Chapter 1, I want to highlight here how an engagement with the experiences of subjects of intervention led me to inquire further into what we can expect from local agencies, their relationship to the international, and the nature of governmentality as power.

The first difficulty was defining and specifying what/who the local is. Oliver Richmond (2009; 2011a), for example, qualifies the concept with the label "local-local"; Gearoid Millar (2018) refers to the "non-elite local." These "more real" locals, instead of buying into the intervention's discourse, experi-

9. This wholly negative view of addiction treatment points to the larger problem of perceptions of mental health more generally.

10. Comment by one of the participants in a group conversation about the 'Empathy Studio'.

ence its consequences without necessarily supporting its aims. In Istanbul, these distinctions were not so clear-cut—we obviously all supported peace, but the visions of what that peace might look like differed greatly. Similarly, there were obvious differences in our positionalities, but it was impossible to create a hierarchy of "elitism" that would take into consideration class differences, religious identities, sexual orientations, and ethnicities and nationalities that we had to fit in.

In a different approach, Séverine Autesserre (2014b, 492) states that all micro-approaches are connected by their aim to "look at peacekeeping processes beyond international, national or capital-based dynamics." In this view, then, the local might be interpreted as that which is *not* the international, national, or directly part of global capitalism. My fellow participants, however, did not consider themselves separated from the international, and even in the cases in which they did, they evaluated this separation as a *problem* to be resolved, not an identity marker to work with.

These issues produced tensions in governmentality accounts of intervention. What I interpreted as a neoliberal focus on the local through governmental techniques was problematised from the introduction session onward. Many people there were obviously not "buying into" these discourses of reconciliation and entrepreneurship—they were there for the free flight or to smoke shisha in cafés. Others were already oriented towards the goals we were supposed to be transforming to. Some were there specifically for the promised contacts and networks, well versed in the market rationality that we were being taught. Others were explicitly leftist and came prepared to deflect these narratives and pursue their own agendas—thus developing their politics through supposedly anti-political practices of civil society and entrepreneurship. Many were engaged in civil societies in their home countries and came seeking specific skills. Moreover, everyone was aware that the skills they were learning might not work back home, where connections, nepotism, and party affiliation matter more than CVs. In all these different experiences, it was obvious that none of us were going to leave the workshop as the well-functioning *homo economicus* described in governmentality studies.

The observations point to larger debates within governmentality studies in IR voiced by a number of critics like Jan Selby (2007), David Chandler (2010b), and Jonathan Joseph (2009; 2010a; 2010b). In addressing their critiques together, Wanda Vrasti (2013) provides a three-point summary: governmentality cannot simply be "scaled up"; governmentality cannot "work" in spaces not governed by advanced liberal rule; and, with the focus on freedom used in governing, governmentality studies lose sight of impe-

rialism and constraints still present in international politics.[11] The summary fits my empirical observations: What does it mean to be governmentalised in countries where everyone knows that opportunities depend much more on networks (or *veze*) than self-betterment? Can we talk about governmentalising specific countries or whole regions based on these micro-interventions? How is self-responsibilisation in Serbia different than it is, for example, in the UK or France?

While these issues emerge and are addressed throughout the book, the observations above also point to a different tension that forms the driving puzzle of the book: What are the consequences of approaching people, processes, and phenomena as "the local," "intervention," or "governmentality" in the first place? Should we change our understandings of those concepts to "fit" observed reality better, and if so, how? And finally, what can we learn from pushing beyond the constitutive limits of these notions?

In the social sciences, concepts allow us to see certain things at the expense of others. Intervention allows us to see particular acts, agents, and aims, "the local" enables us to move from the international into something else, and governmentality makes it possible to see the danger in seemingly emancipatory projects. Yet concepts also depend on closure. They fence off what Edward Said (1983, 241, in Go 2016, 71) referred to as "untidiness": "the essential unmasterable presence that constitutes a large part of historical and social situations." Instead of launching a critique of the social sciences along these lines, this book has a more modest goal. It takes on the task of thinking about intervention from the "untidiness" usually expunged from accounts of intervention.

The questions pursued in the following pages are thus not limited to *how* interventions see the world, something that would require engaging more with interveners themselves. Nor do I try to answer *why* both studies and projects of intervention are unable to see its subjects as equal partners—this has been discussed in both decolonial critiques of Eurocentric erasures (Rutazibwa 2019; Sabaratnam 2011a; 2013; 2017) and minute dissections of the eternal failures of the local turn (Bargués-Pedreny 2018; Hirblinger and Simons 2015; Paffenholz 2015; Randazzo 2017). On the contrary, the book aims to approach people and processes beyond the conceptual confines of intervention, in order to formulate a new conceptual vocabulary for

11. This debate is addressed anew in a more recent edited volume that makes an explicit distinction between the global and the international (Busse 2021). While this newer work provides important fresh perspectives on governmentality in IR, Vrasti's summary is still the most relevant for the purposes here.

understanding projects that work through the hierarchy of the improvers and those being improved.

Research with an Ethnographic Sensibility

I use vignettes from fieldwork because they are effective illustrative tools and provide an ethnographic orientation towards the experiences of those living in areas of intervention that are "untidy." Contrary to approaches that study interveners themselves or the governmental rationalities that they promote, what brought me to Istanbul was a desire to go beyond the intent of government and consider its reception.[12] Recognising the inevitable problems associated with studying the "agency of being governed" (Hansson, Hellberg, and Stern 2014), ethnography brings two important dimensions to the book's approach. First, it uncovers the negotiations, incompleteness, diversity of subjects, and contingency involved in the *reception* of governmentality—issues that are often hidden behind a focus on either the intervention itself or the local mediators the intervention engages. And second, its commitment to long-term engagement and to "sit through" unspectacular times provides an opening for coeval engagement with research subjects.

I understand ethnography as a sensibility that complicates how we conceptualise both those we research and the researcher herself (further elaborated in Chapter 2). This responds to two issues in knowledge production, within intervention scholarship and IR more broadly: the place of subjectivity in knowledge production, and the potentials and pitfalls of engagements with non-Western subjectivity specifically. While IR has turned to ethnography as a way of appreciating the many micro-practices that come together to make global politics, ethnography is often reduced to a "tool" of observation whose most important benefit is capturing parts of reality that other methods do not have access to. Here we travel to fieldwork sites, but instead of paying attention to subjectivity, we look for patterns of speech and behaviour, practices, and the cultures that they belong to (Philipsen 2020; Vrasti 2008). We do not allow ourselves the surprises that would cause us to lose "analytical control" (Miyazaki and Riles 2005, 328, in Philipsen 2020, 6). As Lise Philipsen (2020, 2) has convincingly argued, even after more than a decade of intervention scholarship based on fieldwork, "The sense-making

12. Here I join a number of ethnographers who have similarly explored governmentality in various state and international interventions (Ferguson 1994; Hemment 2015; Li 2007; Lippert and Brady 2016).

of the people situated in the sites of intervention has been strangely disregarded" as a relevant source.

While Philipsen's argument relates to the knowledge of practitioners of intervention, approaching those targeted by the same projects enters dramatically more complex terrain. The exclusion of the voices of the targets of intervention is not accidental, nor simply a product of methodological failures (as Philipsen identifies in the case of interveners). As already mentioned, the exclusion of targets of intervention from accounts of intervention is "emblematic of diverse forms of intellectual Eurocentrism within scholarly research" (Sabaratnam 2017, 6) that shape IR more generally (Blaney and Inayatullah 2008; Blaney and Tickner 2017; Shilliam 2010a; Tickner 2003; Vasilaki 2012).

Confronting these issues, then, is not as straightforward as only "adapting" our methods. Whether we turn to "peripheral academies" or "those who participate in social-scientific work in IR only as objects of empirical investigation" (Hutchings 2011, 647) as starting points of knowledge production, we are faced with particular obstacles. We must navigate the perils of representations, manage the expectations we might have of difference, and make peace with the general unavailability of any "pure" experience in a project that depends on taking experience seriously. Instead of offering a conclusive methodological recipe for solving these "problems," this book illustrates a way of navigating them. I do so through a commitment to conceptualising my interlocutors as coeval political subjects, in both research designs and international politics—a strategy elaborated in the next two chapters and practised throughout the book.

Serbia as the location of the study emerged from its peculiar position in international politics: from international pariah under the genocidal regime of Slobodan Milošević, through a short spell as democracy assistance superstar in the efforts to replace him, to its current position between the European Union and Russia and China. While it has been targeted by an impressive variety of interventions—NATO bombings, democracy promotion, development initiatives, and EU integration—it is missing from IR studies of the region that focus on the spectacular sovereignty-challenging interventions that are unfolding in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina.[13]

While I focus on Serbia, many of my observations relate to "the Balkans" and the "(post-)Yugoslav space" more broadly. These are fraught terms:[14] I

13. For an example of different interventions in the Balkans, see the volume edited by Peter Siani-Davies (2003) and the succinct summary by Susan Woodward (2013).

14. I thank Elena Stavrevska for pushing me to explain my use of these terms more precisely.

do not engage with the whole of the Balkans (however you want to define the region), and this space today is divided by a violent EU border. While there is much to be learned from the Yugoslav project, those of us working with its histories must reckon with the fact that not all its people identified as Yugoslav; that it included racial and colonial violence directed against Roma and Muslim people; and that BCMS (Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, Serbian)—a language often unproblematically framed as "ours"—reifies those exclusions. These histories come alive again in both borderlands and domestic policies; and they need to be kept in mind to prevent slippage into "nostalgic attempts" that look to either "the ruins of second-world colour-blind socialism" or "its postsocialist dead ends" as ways forward (Rexhepi 2023, 10).

My use of the terms like "the Balkans" and "the Yugoslav space" is then both limited and strategic. At times, I use them because I critique scholarly and policy work that similarly takes on the region "as a whole." Other times, my reasoning comes from my own observations of similarities across current borders, whether those are the position of small agricultural producers or young people looking for work abroad. Still more, my use is also political: as an argument that there is value in thinking the region together despite new state and EU borders crisscrossing it; as a retrieval of the word "Balkan" from the insulting connotations of "balkanisation" (Veliu 2020); and as an attempt to recognise how the contradictions of the past shape the present and the future.

Two fields, non-formal education (NFE) and agricultural governance, act as settings for my research. An alternative to choosing policy fields would have been to focus on specific projects or donors. This, however, would entail remaining faithful to intervention's conceptual limitations: what the donors deem important and what they choose to turn into projects. A view of these fields allowed me to track experiences as they are made in the intersection of many actors and issues, and at times have complicated even my own idea of what the site is. Even though these two policy fields are the foundation of my empirical practice, one of the contributions of this book is to highlight the limitations of such understandings of the "field," and Chapters 4 and 6 ultimately go "beyond" these fields.

The reason for the choice of specific fields is twofold. First, these two fields and their seemingly "apolitical" character provide a unique opportunity to study less spectacular and less researched interventions in local politics. Second, as a project that seeks to complicate visions of the local—in both the practice and scholarship of intervention—I also wanted to depart from the usual categories that the Balkans are placed in: those of transitional justice, democracy support and electoral transformation, EU integration, or civil society studies.

NFE, in the form of schools on democracy, civic rights, human rights, and conflict resolution has become an orthodox tool of "soft" interventions. It is situated within the realm of civil society because civil society organisations (CSOs) are the providers of NFE, and it offered easy access to local everyday experiences through attending workshops and interviewing trainers and participants. This allowed me to explore how the supposed beneficiaries of NFE relate to themselves and the political life around them.

While NFE is an area firmly within the civil society sphere, with many different donors involved, the second area of interest, agricultural policy reform, is state led and EU mandated, and presented as an apolitical developmental project unrelated to concepts like freedom and democracy. As such, it provides an opportunity to explore interventions in a sphere very different from the civil society realm of NFE, but at the same time animated by many of the same assumptions of what makes "transition." In focussing upon this area, I explore how civil servants, CSOs, and producers themselves are imagined changing according to ideals of liberal peace and neoliberal subjectivity, and I highlight how a focus on experiences of this transformation complicates such readings.

From Intervention to the Politics of Improvement

My time in Istanbul also forced me to critically approach my own positionality. I was aware of the literature on doing "ethnography at home" and of the strange construction of "home" that can turn a Turkish university into "native" terrain. I was invited by colleagues and supervisors to consider how my own positionality might be captured by the concept of hybridity. Yet this preparation repeatedly was lacking—it failed to prepare me for the small and large discomforts I would feel myself, and for the successes and failures of relating to other people's experiences. One such failure from the "Empathy Studio" exercise serves to illustrate the argument of the book. While the argument was developed in conversation with my interlocutors, rather than through my own auto-ethnography, it is this story that comes to my mind when thinking about the analytical confines of intervention in which its subjects are commonly placed.

As I was comfortably lulled into the sounds of my mother tongue during cigarette breaks and discussed the familiar smells of Turkish coffee that mark homes across Yugoslavia, I felt at home. As we shyly asked each other where we spent the war years, it became obvious that I shared many concerns and experiences with my colleague participants. Yet, as the discussions started

and I asked for everyone's participation consent, both my British affiliation and my Croatian passport were pried open by questions about funding and scholarships that enabled my international education. More than anything, in discussing consent forms and my methodology with Dr. Howard who facilitated the workshop, I automatically felt different. When asking about papers, ethics, and conferences, I thought that he did not look at me as a participant or a "local peace agent" anymore, but instead as a UK-based colleague.

Perhaps luckily, for the "Empathy Studio" exercise I was paired with a young Bosniak man. He thoroughly enjoyed the week and made this very clear at the closing session. He did not feel he needed any specific healing, but he was also not particularly insulted by the "elephant in the room" narrative. Writing this quite a few years later, I see that I should have known that nothing bad or uncomfortable would happen—Edin was an easygoing guy, and his question followed this. Yet I did not know this when I stepped into the small classroom turned into a recording studio. As I sat down, facing Edin in the middle of the multiple-person filming crew, I felt trapped by the gaze of several lights and cameras. The discomfort persisted even after they turned the cameras to film only our hands (upon my request). Dr. Howard came in and leisurely leaned on the door frame. He did not come into any other sessions, and I felt observed—is this how everyone else felt as I took notes throughout the week? As possible questions raced through my mind, I was unable to separate myself from the expectations I imagined others might have of me. Is this the time to inhabit my role as a "war affected" individual? Is this the time to try to exercise a researcher's distance? Will Dr. Howard think that I am "too local" and doubt my methodology if I become too emotional? Or will he consider me a transnational academic, overriding my home attachments, if I ask a question that is boring and removed from the post-conflict experience that I am supposed to have? These questions might seem banal, but the visceral feeling and the contractions in my stomach were real.

I do not use this anecdote only to bring myself into the text as advised by ethnographic orientations, nor do I mean to imply "oneness" with my interlocutors by writing about myself as similar and close to my subjects (Patai 1991, 144, in Pillow 2003, 182). I use it to emphasise the tensions that underline our engagement with subjects who are perceived as local in practices and scholarship of intervention, and to show them as epistemically generative. The different shades of anger expressed by the group in the reaction to the "Empathy Studio" exercise, and my own discomfort at the multiple roles I inhabit, point to a larger problem with how subjectivities,

local subjectivities, are engaged by practices and scholarships of intervention. The group anger and my own reaction were only a small symptom, a visceral illustration, of a much larger problem. Namely, they pointed to the failure to engage the people targeted in these projects as full, contemporaneous, contradictory, and complete subjects of international political and social life. The view of intervention that we have inherited prevents us from seeing subjects of intervention not only as capable of meaningful analysis of their experience of intervention, but as crucial for understanding international politics and our ways of studying it. This book is a story about pushing at the limits of that view and developing a conceptual vocabulary to take us beyond it.

Moving beyond Intervention

Remaining methodologically and analytically faithful to the concept of intervention will always be in tension with efforts to learn *about* and *from* the experiences of everyday people. The discomfort that I felt while being filmed for the "Empathy Studio" exercise stemmed from trying to fit my own experience of a particular moment into the concept of "intervention"—I was either the local that needed saving or a detached international scholar. This feeling of confinement, conceptual inadequacy, and even epistemic violence continued throughout my fieldwork, not in relation to my own experiences, which were usually less participatory than that session in Istanbul, but when trying to make sense of the stories narrated to me by using the concepts I arrived to fieldwork with. It is not (only) conceptualisations of the local or understandings of governmentality that prevent coeval engagement with our subjects—the concept of intervention itself reduces subjects to nothing more than the targets of those interventions, even when it tries to grasp their realities and experiences.

Beyond ethico-political obligations, engagement with the targets of intervention has far-reaching analytical consequences. Specifically, I argue that starting from and thinking alongside the experiences of people living the consequences of intervention exposes the limits of current conceptualisations of international intervention in IR and provides us with clues for how to work towards an alternative framework. This alternative framework is better able to comprehend the broader contexts and consequences of projects that are launched in the name of peace, democracy, and progress. In other words, I focus on a particular paradox that has thus far not been discussed: introducing the "local subject" into intervention scholarship (or practice) is impossible within existing understandings of what intervention actually is.

The constitutive categories of intervention (agents conceptualised as either local or international; fields of visibility as imagined in the interventions themselves; and an understanding of interventions' aims and outcomes as either a success or a failure of liberalism) hide more than they illuminate. Thus, this book concludes by advocating that we forgo the concept of "intervention" and instead investigate these dynamics through research focussed on the *politics of improvement*. The *empirical* openings for this new understanding of intervention are already underway in intervention research, as scholars are expanding their views to treat, for example, socioeconomic violence as a part of transitional justice, sexuality politics as a dimension of EU accession, and the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security as shaping feminist and women's organising (Lai 2016; Slootmaeckers, Touquet, and Vermeersch 2016; McLeod 2015).

Introducing "new" areas into existing frameworks, however, is not enough. The analytical strength of the concept of the politics of improvement lies in thinking together wider effects of improvement schemes that order things as varied as international interventions and investment plans to personal life choices. It is a conceptual lens for understanding how individual lives encounter intervention, one that creates wide space for the always unfished project of coeval engagement. What unites these projects is not the definition of an actor or delimitation of fields of action, but a teleological understanding of progress and the belief in human agency to facilitate this progression (see A. Mitchell 2014). This re-conceptualisation goes beyond the constitutive limitations of intervention in three ways: beyond local/international agents, beyond the fields of visibility prescribed by interventions themselves, and beyond a success/failure view of liberalism that prevents theorising it as lived experience. More generally, it also calls for a critique that invites us to think big while trying to understand global politics, and practise humility while trying to learn from our interlocutors.

In the interpretivist vocabulary, this can be presented as arguing for the importance of casing studies, rather than studying cases (see Soss 2021). A realist approach to case selection implies finding a case that fits our conceptual class of interest. I have often wondered whether the processes I study "fit" the conceptual class of "intervention." Is modernising agriculture in preparation for EU membership a case of intervention? How much foreign funding does a project need to "count"? But the rest of the book is interested in a different set of questions. As important fieldwork-based studies move to everyday practices, art, social movements, and youth politics as sites of peacebuilding, we should also be wary of the effects of casing such a wide variety of political experiences as intervention. How does this change the

way we approach these subjects? Does it affect what we expect to learn? Could critical work further reify the same problematic concepts?

My argument shows the power of a nominalist approach. Here, instead of studying a case that we had confirmed "belongs" to our conceptual class, a study unfolds and makes us wonder, "What is this a case of?" (Soss 2021). The observations in the rest of the book led me to question international intervention as a casing, and allowed me to recognise it as a concept that organises how the discipline of IR understands the Balkans. My fieldwork made me wonder whether the intersection of local and global land markets might be a more important story to tell—could this be a case of contradictions constitutive to liberal improvement, rather than something limited to spaces and cases of post-conflict reconstruction? Is the concept of intervention limiting my understanding of subjects of intervention? What can we learn when we transgress its conceptual limits?

In explaining the importance of casing a study rather than studying a case, Joe Soss (2021, 90) writes that in casing a study "we do more than just place it in an empirical group: we adopt a schema of understanding—a way of knowing—that organizes and guides our analysis." Intervention is a way of knowing, and it organises and guides our analyses to make it impossible to engage with subjects of intervention as contemporaneous subjects of international politics.

I hope this book contributes to the rich literature developing a more nuanced appreciation of international efforts in Southeast Europe without erasing the subjectivities of those whose lives are supposed to be transformed in these efforts. These are those who study international intervention while remaining close to grounded experiences (Deiana 2018; Gilbert 2020; Lai 2020b; Mikuš 2018; Musliu 2021; Subotić 2009; Summa 2021; Vetta 2019), those who examine how policies are translated in this process (Bilić 2016; Deacon and Stubbs 2007; Lendvai 2007; Lendvai and Stubbs 2009; McLeod 2015; Slootmaeckers, Touquet, and Vermeersch 2016; Stubbs 2005; 2015), and those making sense of ways in which the ideal of Europe intersects with local desires and contexts to produce what it means to be Balkan, post-Yugoslav, or Serbian (Krajina and Blanuša 2016; T. Petrović 2012; 2014). In expanding our view in these multiple directions, however, I do not only want to add nuance to the complexity of social, economic, and political realities in the Balkans. Perhaps more importantly, I want to show how a particular empirical engagement shifts not only what we notice, but how we conceptualise those observations.

By recasting intervention as a part of a wider politics of improvement, I argue for a conceptual retreat from intervention. Olivia Rutazibwa's (2013) work on retreat as an ethical alternative to intervention challenges the fact of

internationals "being there" in the first place. My argument is perhaps less radical. It is difficult to imagine Serbia, or the post-Yugoslav space, outside of the power of Europe as an organising force of political and social life, despite recognising the corrosive nature of the EU's overbearing presence. Additionally, the planetary challenges that await us in the coming decades will surely require transnational action, albeit hopefully underwritten by logics of solidarity rather than paternalism. I thus do not argue for a practical retreat, nor can I offer advice on "doing" intervention better. Instead, this book takes as its target knowledge production as an important part of liberal interventionism. It calls for a conceptual retreat that would decentre intervention to explore other ways in which its targets participate in international political life. It is thus an example of a research practice that follows the politics of improvement instead of intervention traditionally understood, and it can perhaps inspire novel directions of moving beyond and besides intervention thinking.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 1 focusses on intervention as a concept that shapes what and how we see. While the book itself does not dwell on the interveners' point of view or the rationalities and nature of interventions themselves—topics thoroughly discussed in the existing literature (Goetze 2017; Lai 2020b; A. Mitchell 2014)—it is crucial to recognise how our own forms of engagement with subjects, processes, and structures in intervention settings are shaped by existing systems of thought. This chapter identifies international intervention as a "gatekeeping" concept through which Southeast Europe is made known to IR and political science, and that severely limits what questions are asked and how answers are produced. It further connects liberal interventionism and its entwinement with "transition thinking" in Southeast Europe to a larger system of thought that Johannes Fabian ([1983] 2014) termed "allochronism" and that forms the basis of comparativist thinking by imagining different spaces on the road to the same liberal future. Finally, these insights are used to examine how intervention defines its acts, agents, and aims, and how this limits what we see when trying to engage local experiences and ways we conceptualise those observations.

Chapter 2 presents ethnographic fieldwork as understood in this book: not only navigating the practicalities of "methods," but also situating them within the particular context in which we work. Besides defining ethnography as a particular sensibility and demystifying it through an exposition of

particular "tactics" I used, the chapter also introduces the social, political, and economic context in which I conducted fieldwork in 2016. I bring an ethnographic sensibility to that context and outline how I navigated the historical narratives, scholarly and public debates, and reflexivity with which my methodology is enmeshed.

The following four chapters are written and should be read as pairs, with each pair referring to one policy area. Chapters 3 and 5 (the first of each pair) use the experiences of subjects of intervention to create a fuller account of intervention itself: they examine what hides under the simplifying label of "the local," unearth the historical background of those images, and trace the unexpected effects of specific acts of intervention targeting the transformation of those "local" people. Chapters 4 and 6 (the second of each pair) follow the same experiences beyond intervention to understand the wider politics of improvement within which specific interventions operate.

Chapter 3 analyses experiences of interventions in NFE. It explores how youth were differently positioned as subjects in different political contexts: as a crucial element of state policy in Yugoslavia, as guerrillas of democracy promotion in the 1990s, and as political children in narratives of "transition." While an ethnographic approach to governmentality points to the importance of concepts like entrepreneurialism, individualism, and responsibilisation, the chapter highlights that these individualising practices both take part in and reflect a larger re-conceptualisation of the citizen, civil society, and the state.

Chapter 4 illustrates how we can use fieldwork to go beyond intervention. First, the chapter explores youth unemployment as a field of government absent from official programmes, but crucial for people attending NFE activities. Here I pay attention to the silences observed during fieldwork by focussing on youth *absent* from the educational activities I attended and who point to very different programmes of government: vocational education and emigration—two issues that were at the centre of public debates during my time in Serbia. Second, the chapter discusses youth who voice and enact different visions of governing and contextualises these narratives alongside ideas of resistance and political change.

Chapter 5 analyses agricultural policy as it is transformed in the process of Europeanisation. It discusses the historical background of agricultural policy before focussing on current interventions in agricultural governance that are mandated through the process of EU accession. The "Europeanisation" of agricultural policy implies the simultaneous transformation of three distinct subjects: the public servants who are expected to transform the state along neoliberal lines; the peasants, or (semi)-subsistence farm-

ers, themselves who are taught to become entrepreneurs more responsive to the market; and civil society that is supposed to participate in and mediate between the two. In this discussion, we see how particular images of local agency inspire programmes of government—both within contemporary EU approaches and in longer historical developments.

Chapter 6 takes us beyond intervention to investigate land policy in agricultural government. It shows foreign direct investment in land as a particular logic of government and contextualises it within the discussion on subject formation presented in the preceding chapter. It also presents resistance and various reasonings used to contest foreign direct investment. In doing so, the chapter not only addresses issues of resistance and agency, but crucially widens our understanding of international politics and makes an important step towards studying the Balkans globally.

In the conclusion, I use the empirical material thus far presented to challenge the ways intervention conceptualises acts, agents, and aims. We see subjects who are supposed to be empowered, but also those who are expected to silently disappear. The power that engages them is sometimes nurturing and dispersed, but at other times coercive and violent. The fields in which these experiences are made far transcend the narrow fields of action described in programme documents and policies. In response, I argue that the concept of intervention itself stands at the heart of our analytical problems, and present the *politics of improvement* as a better conceptualisation of these processes and the subjects that they engage. The conclusion situates this rethinking of intervention within the wider project of globalising and democratising IR to show how the politics of improvement changes the way we think about critique and write about Europe.

Unlike many critiques of international intervention, this book does not aim to uncover or define their true nature: whether it is an imperial plot or a benevolent desire to develop. This would require exploring the intervention and the interveners more—a project tackled by many that has produced a spate of works that unpack, define, and problematise interventions. This book does, however, touch upon the nature of rule in the countries doing the intervention, simply because scholars of intervention almost always write two stories: one about the accomplished West that does the intervention and is the bastion of peace, development, and democracy, and the other about "the Rest," devoid of these features and needing help to achieve them.[15]

I also move away from trying to determine whether a particular intervention is a success or a failure. This too would require me to submit to the

15. I borrow the formulation from Larbi Sadiki (2015).

intervention's definition of success/failure and remain limited by the parameters demarcated by the intervention itself—thus again excluding those already absent from them. This desire to stay free of the confines of intervention also explains my restraint when it comes to policy prescriptions. I refrain from offering advice on how to do interventions, or local ownership, "better." The jobs of a critic and a programmer are necessarily different. A programmer must think within the parameters of the possible, which are set by the powers at play, while the critic can focus precisely on the construction and effects of those parameters. While "programming demands closure" that allows one to focus on a particular issue and possible solution, critique depends on "openings" (Li 2008, 116). As will become clear throughout the book, the scholar's desire to study intervention requires similar closures. It is precisely against these closures that this book is written, not because I imagine that ultimate freedom from closures is possible, but because I believe in the always unfinished process of challenging them. I hope this book pushes scholars to engage with subjects *beyond* the closures of liberal interventionism. If anything, I would argue for letting go of the idea that scholars always have advice to offer—the hubris that makes things doable and expertise practicable needs to be contained if we seek not just to help others, but to produce knowledge with them.

CHAPTER 1

Seeing Like an Intervention

At a dinner party on one of my return trips to Belgrade, I was asked what exactly I study about the Balkans. I resorted to my easy answer: international intervention. By this time, the argument of this book was slowly forming in my head and I was fully aware of the answer's failure to "change the subjects" (Sabaratnam 2011a) of my study. In this formulation, I was still focussing on intervention, rather than on the experiences of the people living and breathing in spaces where interventions are launched. I ignored the slight feeling of discomfort, but another person at the table was fast to laugh off my seemingly easy answer: "Ha! International intervention, the one thing that we all study in this region!" And it is true, much of the English-language literature about the Balkans—especially in IR and political science—seems to be interested in how the international intervenes in the local: what the EU does, how the local community complies or resists these measures, how opinions towards NATO change, etc. There is a tendency for Southeast Europe to serve as a showcase for intervention. This chapter distils some of the implications of this tendency.

My answer that night is not surprising in itself. International intervention has rightly been at the centre of the imagination of a varied group of scholars: political scientists, anthropologists, human geographers, and those belonging to the specialised field of peace and conflict studies. Understood traditionally as coercive action or in its transformed "softer, but wider" rendition, intervention's ability to seep through sovereign borders is captivating. Whether the intention is to pursue the most noble of goals or secure the most selfish of interests, its practice encompasses ideas of power, difference, and change that international politics is fundamentally made of.

Even though different strands of critical literature have made important strides towards the project of including diverse lives and experiences in the

study of intervention, they remain wedded to intervention as an end goal. Many such works engage creatively and powerfully with local subjects and politics and show the potential and importance of "reconstructing subjecthood" (Sabaratnam 2017, 38), but the endpoint is always international intervention itself. In this chapter, I discuss the implications and consequences of this focus and show how it shapes what gets represented and how. What does it mean that "we all study intervention" in the post-Yugoslav space?

This chapter proceeds in three sections. I first define international intervention as a gatekeeping concept: it overdetermines the way scholars engage with Southeast Europe by using the Yugoslav space as a "showcase" of intervention dynamics. As Arjun Appadurai argued, "There is a tendency for places to become showcases for specific issues over time, and . . . the sources and implications of this tendency are poorly understood" (1986, 358). I call these tendencies and their implications "intervention thinking." This way of thinking and seeing is also steeped in a larger condition of the social sciences that Johannes Fabian ([1983] 2014) termed allochronism, or a system of thought that denies coevalness to its non-Western interlocutors. I use this concept to make sense of discussions on "transitology"[1] that marked post-war transformation in Serbia (and the region more broadly) and show how this way of thinking still shapes how people in Southeast Europe are approached in knowledge production. The following section then illustrates the conceptual boundaries of intervention by showing how its defining parameters of acts, actors, and aims shape what we see in fieldwork and the ways in which we conceptualise our observations. In the final section, I review some important efforts that have worked against allochronism in approaching people living in spaces of intervention, and onto which I build.

Gatekeeping Concepts and Allochronism in International Intervention

Since the 1990s, the region that was Yugoslavia has been a key site of liberal intervention and a source of data for the scholarship that studies and shapes it. It was a site for introducing the age of "new interventionism" in international politics (Sörensen 2002; Woodward 2013), and Yugoslavia, alongside Rwanda, became a "paradigmatic case" in the ethnic conflict literature (Desrosiers 2018; Desrosiers and Vučetić 2018). While the attraction of the region has largely subsided in the last ten years, with attention moving to

1. Blagojević (2009, 82) notes that the term was coined with "inscribed irony" by Anna Wessely.

conflict and post-conflict processes in the Global South, and more recently Ukraine and Palestine, the importance of international intervention for the study of Southeast Europe in English-language academia cannot be overstated, and important new (post-2020) works abound (e.g., Gilbert 2020; Lai 2020b; Summa 2021; Musliu 2021).

In this process, international intervention became what Arjun Appadurai referred to as a "gatekeeping concept." Writing in anthropology, Appadurai argues that issues such as kinship, honour, shame, or gifts become "privileged objects of anthropological attention." They are "concepts . . . that seem to limit anthropological theorizing about the place in question, and that define the quintessential and dominant questions of interest in the region" (Appadurai 1986, 357). International intervention is one such concept that acts as a gatekeeping casing for Southeast Europe: it defines the questions we pose and the interest we have in the Yugoslav region, and limits our theorising of its place in international politics.

While rarely discussed within IR, the problems of gatekeeping concepts are regularly noted in the wider literature dealing with post-Yugoslav spaces. Elisa Helms (2013, 37–38), for example, reflected on ways in which ethnonationalism and post-socialism shape the study of post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina. Ethnonationalism solidifies "ethnic blocks as actors in political and military conflict" when studies rely on "statements about what Serbs want, Croats think, or Bosniacs reject" (Helms 2013, 38). Socialism, on the other hand, appears as a caricature that is denied attention both on its own terms and as part of post-war economic transformations (Helms 2013, 39). The tendencies combine to relegate economic processes of post-*socialist* transformation to the background. This obscures the historical context of post-war transformations and ways in which particular understandings of the past shape the political present and imaginations of the future (Gilbert 2006). Hence, while it may be easy to laugh off academic fads that take over journals and publishing houses every few years, these trends profoundly shape not only what topics and themes receive funding, but also how those themes are understood.

Drawing from these discussions, we might then ask what the prevalence of international intervention as an organising concept for approaching Southeast Europe does to our research practice. Does it compare to the effects of ethnonationalism and post-socialism as gatekeeping concepts in the region? In short, I argue that international intervention, as a gatekeeping concept, determines our empirical and analytical frames and guides our research practices in both conscious and unconscious ways. Casting something as intervention shapes how researchers perceive the agents, acts, and aims they encounter and

leads them to theorise in particular ways: we understand interventions as acts unfolding in particular fields of visibility in specific temporal sequences; we depend on the division of the local and the international as denoting both agentic capacities and the nature of that agency; and we talk about how liberalism as an aim of intervention is missed, distorted, or corrupted in the process.

Before we discuss the implications of intervention as a gatekeeping concept, it is important to note its sources. These limitations are neither unique nor freestanding. Understandings of intervention are intimately shaped by "the imperial episteme" dominant in the social sciences (see Go 2016). We (scholars trained in intervention thinking) imagine the international to have agency over the local, we presume to know what matters, we aim to determine whether our projects and concepts work as intended, and we seek explanations when they fail.

To make sense of this wide condition, I turn to allochronism, with coevalness as its opposite, as a set of concepts useful for pondering the causes and consequences of these particular ways of seeing and thinking. They are discussed in Johannes Fabian's ([1983] 2014) critique of the construction of the anthropological subject. The argument revolves around a contradiction: ethnographic encounters rely on the contemporaneity of researchers and their subjects in the fieldwork experience, while anthropological discourse negates that contemporaneity. Even though researchers meet their interlocutors in the present of fieldwork, they are there to explore a civilisational past and find laws that govern its evolution. In other words, human experience is fit into existing evolutionary ideas through a temporal distancing in which the scholar is living in the future of her interlocutors. Anthropological production depends on this denial of coevalness or allochronism, "a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse" (Fabian [1983] 2014, 31). Coeval engagement, on the other hand, implies encountering interlocutors as contemporaneous subjects of international politics and centring their experiences as a base for knowledge production. It also opens up the space for thinking through the politics of improvement.

Allochronism and the Narrative of "Transition"

Allochronism is a crucial dimension of a developmentalism that pretends the existence of a known destination of political and economic development. David Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah have shown how this outlook enables IR as an endeavour to explain difference between units through tem-

poral lags (Inayatullah and Blaney 2004, 89–93; Blaney and Inayatullah 2010, 9–10). Outside of academic knowledge production, allochronism is more broadly constitutive of liberal (interventionist) ideology in what Beate Jahn (2007b, 224) refers to as "its core contradiction," that is, "the universalist claim that all peoples are free and able to govern themselves, and the particularist philosophy of history which posits a developmental inequality between liberals and nonliberals and thus denies the latter these rights." People are nominally "the same," but time stands in the way of that sameness (Inayatullah and Blaney 2004, 92).

This comparativist bias is also at the foundation of intervention scholarship that demarcates the interveners from the intervened upon. We conceptualise units, place them in hierarchical comparisons of local/international, non-Western/Western, modern/traditional, and imagine (and perceive) one as having the agency to act upon the other. The distinction between the local and the international then becomes more than a descriptive phrase and acts as a timeline of liberalism itself, with the local slowly moving (with support) towards the liberal ideals of the international. Once the linear teleology is in place, differences in particular timelines can be explained away through tradition, essence, nature, or culture. While the critique of binaries and othering has reached a status of truism in critical intervention scholarship, approaching this problem with the concept of coevalness highlights that intervention scholarship here is a part of larger frameworks of both scientific and common-sense perceptions of difference. The inability of intervention scholarship and practice to take the targets of interventions seriously—noted by many—is an inability to consider them as temporal equals.

In the post-Yugoslav space, this allochronism is embodied in the narrative of transition. Much has been said about the developmentalist teleology that underwrites theories of modernisation and transition (Jahn 2007a; 2007b), but critiques written from the perspective of transition's subjects focus more precisely on the question of a "known endpoint." Dejan Jović (2010, 50) notes the shift from the "explanatory" ambitions of older transition theories that sought to understand outcomes of political transitions from authoritarianism to an unknown endpoint, to the "anticipatory" aims of post-1989 scholarship that looked at transition as a "journey with a known destination, one that we can clearly define by using the models of democracy already developed in the case of West European societies." The difference between two strands of transitology represents an entrenchment of evolutionary teleology, often underpinned by the same comparativist character invoked by Blaney and Inayatullah above. The most important shift that Jović observes is a change in the definition of transition itself. While pre-1989 transition

theories were defined as transitions "from authoritarianism" to something else that is not necessarily known, post-1989 theories knew very well that they were headed "to democracy." The definition of transition theory itself changed: from an "uncertain journey from 'known' to unknown, it became a 'certain' travel from 'known' to 'known'—from one clear model to another" (Jović 2010, 53). This is the birth of transitology, "the science of how to most effectively engineer the transition towards democracy and a market economy" (Müller 2019, 537; citing Kubik 2013). Importantly, this urge to both understand and engineer makes an explicit connection between scholarly and policy work: indeed, many transitologists advised, consulted, and supported both international and national projects. Similarly, scholars studying the EU integration process today straddle academic and more "practical" work through think thanks, public appearances, and direct cooperation with EU projects. As the ensuing chapters will show, the EU today seems like the "known" endpoint with no alternative.

Hajrudin Hromadžić further describes transition as having a paradoxical temporality according to which post-Yugoslav societies are included in the globalised present while simultaneously being "irretrievably separated" and unable to "equally participate in that time and its world" (2020, 85). Similarly, Boris Buden's reflections (in Pupovac 2014) can be interpreted as identifying closures effected by a denial of coevalness: while critique in the socialist era strove for freedom that was open, the "freedom" implied as the end of transition is a freedom defined and directed by someone else—by the Western attitude that the West has "been there and done that" (Hindess 2008). In 2009, Marina Blagojević similarly argued that the semiperiphery is "different, but not different enough" from the core, and "similar, but not similar enough" to the periphery. This results, she writes, "in constant efforts to "improve" the semiperiphery": 'We-know-what-is-good-for-you-because-we-have-already-done-it-philosophy resonates in most of the core-semiperiphery communication" (Blagojević 2009, 37).

The evolutionary thinking at the heart of transitology—whether borrowed from natural sciences or arriving from the secularisation of Christian theologies in European political theory—is used to explain differences in the social, political, and economic world. It is "based on the assumption that there is a universalist trend in history, one which inevitably brings societies from their 'backward' phase of authoritarianism to the developed phase of liberal democracy" (Jović 2010, 58). While Jović finds it in transition theorists like Tatu Vanhanen and Francis Fukuyama, this type of evolutionary thinking connects critiques of transitiology with decolonial thought. It is a part of what Anibal Quijano (2000) identifies as the "two principal found-

ing myths" (542) of Eurocentric systems of thought more generally: evolutionism and dualism (550–51).

Evolutionism posits a "theory of history as a linear sequence of universally valid events" leading inexorably towards the ideals of European or Western civilisation (Quijano 2000, 550). Dualism, on the other hand, naturalises the different stages of this unidirectional history: the difference between Europe and other locations/cultures becomes one of "natural (racial) difference" instead of a "consequence of a history of power" (Quijano 2000, 542). Evolutionism cements liberal democracy as the "end of history" that Southeast Europe must transition to, while dualism creates political, cultural, economic, post-socialist, and/or Balkan "backwardness" as an explanation of not being there already. Difference becomes an explanation of circumstance and removes the local from international politics. Instead of conceptualising political agency and processes that bring about different results, we turn to essentialising and simplifying characteristics as explanations in themselves (Sabaratnam 2013, 266–68). And, importantly, this framework is not reserved for thought and policy coming from the West but is adopted by local publics and scholars: "The semiperiphery thinks about itself through the concepts which are being imported, and it observes itself through the eyes of others" (Blagojević 2009, 57).

Allochronism and Ways of Seeing

While it is clear how allochronism shapes ideas of progress and development, it is worth delving further into its effects on knowledge production. Put most simply, it shapes the latter by assuming an endpoint and assigning greater relevance to "those who are seen as belonging to the present" (Helliwell and Hindess 2013, 73). Christine Helliwell and Barry Hindess (2013, 73) expand on Fabian when they argue that "those who are seen as belonging to the present assume a greater moral and political significance than those who are seen as belonging to the past." While they speak about hierarchies of value in *government*—whose lives are seen as having moral and political weight—the same can be observed in *research practice*: the interpretations, concepts, and frameworks of researchers assume "greater significance" than anything we might encounter because "we" know where our interlocutors are (or should be) heading. In short, the West has "been there, done that" (Hindess 2008). In Blagjoević's words, "There is a recurring tendency of the centre to repeatedly see and interpret local, contextual configurations as 'déjà vu' phenomena, in the 'normal' process of 'modernisation'" (2009, 76).

The attitude of "knowing what matters" shapes both *how* representation works and *what* gets represented in the first place. Crucially, this is not a problem of (only) privileging the intervener's agendas and points of view—an issue that has been thoroughly dissected in critical scholarship on the local turn. This is also a problem of understanding the researcher as a knowing subject temporally separated from the unknowing research participants. Oumar Ba (2022, 11) finds that research becomes a part of intervention and exhibits the same characteristics that Sabaratnam (2017) finds in intervention itself: there is a need to assert the political relevance of both researchers and their concepts, there is little consideration of negative effects of research practices, and the process unfolds with an assumption of entitlement to the lives and stories approached.

Moreover, while most scholars of intervention would instinctively reject overt notions of linearity and argue instead for hybridised and contingent outcomes, a deeper-seated allochronism survives in the continued centring of various "failures" of intervention: the failure to listen to local people, implement local ownership, or evaluate interventions correctly. In doing so, even critical scholarship remains wedded to a predefined (although more emancipatory) endpoint. This focus on success and failure forms a crucial part of intervention thinking where researchers "share the conceptual and temporal coordinates of intervention practitioners, as well as their categories of practice, objects of analysis, and concern with success and failure" (Gilbert 2020, 13). In other words, instead of reflecting on how and why we case our studies—constantly asking what this is a case of (Soss 2021)—intervention scholarship often reproduces the casings offered by intervention programmes themselves. Coeval engagement requires breaking away from this shared heritage of intervention thinking so that it can move in different directions.

Since the aim of this book is to focus specifically on local subjects, it is important to note that developmentalist thinking, embedded in allochronism, has also led intervention practices to "find the local" in the last two decades. Because achievement of the universal state of market democracy kept being delayed, the scope of intervention changed as it searched for different explanations of failure. It is difficult to separate scholarly thinking from actual policies: specific understandings of change cannot be detached from efforts to instigate that change. In Jović's (2010, 59) interpretation, transition theories became a process of "searching for a set of 'objective factors' which could enable us to explain, measure and, finally, construct the process of 'democratic transition' in Eastern Europe." Jahn (2007a; 2007b, 222) detailed more thoroughly how these ways of thinking inspired very particular US foreign policies, from modernisation to statebuilding operations:

> Democracy aid focused on elections was not successful because it overlooked shortcomings in state capacity, civil society and administration. Economic aid was not successful because it overlooked shortcomings in governance, civil society and indigenous culture. The ultimate responsibility for these failures lies with Third World peoples whose capacities were naively overestimated by liberal analysts and policy makers.

A denial of coevalness is crucial for assigning "ultimate responsibility" for the failure of liberalism to the "lack of capacities" of people living in spaces of intervention. Its comparativist teleology permits essentialisations to be used as explanations: the failure of evolution to appear is explained by dualism.

It is not surprising to discover that "discursive construction of subjectivities through the practice of representation has both political and material consequences" (Manchanda 2020, 226). Nivi Manchanda has detailed this process in the case of Afghanistan, showing how representational tropes "hastily and unjustly constituted [Afghanistan] as a problem needing to be fixed, as a failure that needs to be corrected" (2020, 9). Similar processes have been detailed in the Yugoslav space as well: from historical narratives and popular culture shaping US responses to the wars in the 1990s (see Hansen 2006) to the more recent revival of similar tropes in Europeanisation discourses (Majstorović and Vučkovac 2016).

My point in this chapter, however, is not just that tropes that work along a "civilisational slope" (Melegh 2006) shape international politics. I also want to highlight how particular casings—often products of similar tropes—affect scholarly expectations of different empirical phenomena. Petr Jehlička, for example, recently highlighted how food self-provisioning practices (growing and sharing food), still common in East Europe, were framed either as "evidence of the de-modernisation and de-differentiation of postsocialist societies" or, more recently, as the "legacy of habits developed during the socialist period with its shortage economy and unreliability of supply" (2021, 8). In other words, the phenomenon of people growing food, making jams, and sharing them with family and friends was cased and understood either as a remnant of "tradition" or as a product of the "the lag" in incorporation into capitalist markets. With time, East Europeans would modernise and develop market capacities enough to join the West in not thinking about producing and sharing food.

Casings and framings have far-reaching consequences. The denial of coevalness—thinking about self-provisioning practices as remnants of old cultures and old economic systems—prevented scholars from understand-

ing their complexity and potential. The situation is dramatically illustrated by the fact that the same practices in Western Europe were celebrated as groundbreaking models of sustainability that are enhancing food security and social resilience, as healthy hobbies, or as innovative sharing economies that contest neoliberalism—as models to be learned *from* (Jehlička 2021; see also Jehlička et al. 2020). It is then natural to wonder what opportunities for learning were missed in a seemingly "simple" mis-framing of a seemingly "backward" practice. This is the power of gatekeeping concepts and the systems of thought they emerge from: they frame what we understand something to be and do.

Intervention is one such powerful frame. Allochronism shapes *what* gets represented: as researchers, we take the viewpoint of the international agents of intervention and observe interventions as particular acts within fields of visibility prescribed by the intervention itself. It also shapes *how* particular issues are represented as they are categorised and operationalised in a variety of ways, from master binaries like liberal/illiberal, Western/non-Western, and backward/normal, to the particularities of locals, spoilers, and policy fields. In intervention scholarship, these work through specific conceptualisations of intervention acts, agents, and aims.

Limits of Intervention Thinking

Acts in Defined Fields of Visibility

Intervention cannot be understood on its own, and scholars emphasise the need to consider "the historicity and international embeddedness of non-Western societies" (Bliesemann de Guevara 2010, 117). Efforts to do so are, however, limited by the fields of visibility through which intervention is conceptualised and empirically approached. I take the term "fields of visibility" from Michel Foucault, via Nicholas Rose, who writes that "to govern, it is necessary to render visible the space over which government is to be exercised" (Rose 1999, 36). Similarly, "to study," it is necessary to render visible a particular field at the expense of others.

Studies of intervention, critical and otherwise, operate with an understanding of intervention proceeding in "discrete acts" (MacMillan 2013, 1041) ordered within predefined fields of action that translate into delineated fields of visibility. Research designed to investigate them similarly relies on specific programmes implemented by international actors and has as its starting point a choice of a field of action. Thus, even when looking to

explicitly engage with local agencies and effects, accounts that stay within interventions' parameters ultimately reproduce interventions' fields of visibility and their constitutive exclusions—geographic, topical, and temporal. In other words, they share intervention's focus and blind spots.

The preoccupation with particular acts in specific fields of visibility has been implicitly supported by the common-sense use of governmentality frameworks in the study of international interventions that have become more dispersed and increasingly concerned with individual transformations. Within these approaches, subjectivity itself becomes the locus of government, and that subjectivity is shaped though mundane, but specific, acts. These are, for example, the project call and management tools of the European Instrument for Democracy Promotion (Kurki 2011); externally funded projects, experts, and meetings in transitional justice initiatives (Obradović-Wochnik 2018); and the twinning tool of the EU (İşleyen 2015), to which I will return in Chapter 5. While these tools deserve much of the attention they have received, defining research projects around them also inadvertently reproduces the fields of visibility defined by intervention itself.

Most obviously, orthodox fields of visibility are shaped by and simultaneously reify deep assumptions of *what* and *who* matters in the study of international politics, excluding everyday experiences from the realm of international politics and doubly sidelining everyday actors outside of the Global North. The traditional IR gaze looks to "high places"—diplomats, international institutions, and places of power traditionally understood (even when they are approached through ethnography, practice, and emotion)—and ignores the politics of the mundane and personal (Enloe 2011; 2014). This has recently been challenged by a focus on the everyday. Here the everyday is not just a particular realm that we take into account when "widening" our understanding of politics to include "small case, local, or bottom up conceptions of politics" (Guillaume and Huysmans 2019, 279). On the contrary, it is the focus of a "distinct analytics" that "engages the problem of naming as 'political' subjects, sites, practices or objects" (Guillaume and Huysmans 2019, 279–280). Here, the feminist insight that the personal is political does not translate to just the personal being international, but to an understanding that "the international is personal"—it requires asking "what 'international politics' is and where it takes place" (Enloe 2014, 351).

When moving to spaces outside of the Global North, these exclusions intensify. While much of the literature on intervention, in Southeast Europe and more generally, has been critical of the liberal peace paradigm and the statebuilding operations it informs, it has also habitu-

ally sidelined non-Western voices: both those of the objects of interventions (Sabaratnam 2017) and those of non-Western researchers (Džuverović 2018; Visoka and Musliu 2019). While I am particularly interested in the positioning of Southeast/Central/East Europe in this process (see Mälksoo 2021), these exclusions are deeply embedded in broader methodological and analytical norms that exclude non-Western subjects (Sabaratnam 2013). They are underwritten by a wider system of Eurocentric thinking that denies non-Western agencies or conceptualises them through cultural and ontological difference (Capan 2017; Inayatullah and Blaney 2004; Sabaratnam 2013).

Beyond limiting what we see, fields of visibility also shape how we conceptualise our observations. There is a temporality to these fields that ignores not only the particularities of the local historical context in which interventions unfold, but also interconnected global histories. Many scholars of intervention have warned that intervention cannot be understood on its own and have emphasised the need to explore "wider influences which reach beyond the immediate political situation, temporally as well as spatially" (Bliesemann de Guevara 2010, 117). Excavating these connections depends on seeing everyday actors—beyond the well-established notion of "who matters"—as political agents with relevant histories and futures.

Finally, the repetitive nature of fields of visibility produces a set of communities that are over-researched, sidelining the rest. Those that fit our descriptions of what matters tend to become communities described as having "research fatigue"—spaces and people that have been consumed by the extractivist nature of knowledge production (Clark 2008). Genocide, wartime gender-based violence, civil society, transitional justice, and fraught Europeanisation have become gatekeeping concepts in their own right, and international intervention is habitually understood through them, at the expense of other spaces, processes, and subjects.

Daniela Lai (2020a) has written about intervention scholars in over-researched contexts as themselves performing an intervention that defines what matters. Writing about Bosnia and Herzegovina, she talks about peripheral areas (outside of Sarajevo) becoming "doubly peripheral": the lack of international presence also leads to being bypassed by scholars (Lai 2020a, 178–79). My approach partially reproduces this in the case of Serbia since I also leave out the majority of the country south of Belgrade with the justifications of time and practicality. However, being based in Novi Sad and Belgrade and travelling through rural Vojvodina brought to the fore the same dynamics that Lai discusses. Not only did I discover new areas of research to pursue, but the people I spoke to in Vojvodina often engaged

with me enthusiastically since they were not an over-researched population, such as civil society.

These exclusions are not only an effect of spatiality, which Lai highlights so well, but also a reflection of our disciplinary orientations. In IR, "We are encouraged to study the operation of international intervention before we are drawn to pushing the boundaries of research towards issues that are marginal, obscured or whose relevance is contested" (Lai 2020a, 178). In other words, reproducing fields of visibility, both topical and geographical, not only obscures particular issues, but also further removes from consideration people who are *already* made silent in programmes of intervention, like young people looking for low-paid employment or small producers and peasant farmers who are expected to silently disappear in the march of progress, but who appear later in this book.

In more recent debates on the importance of local (research) perspectives, the issues of themes and topics—which can be usefully conceptualised as fields of visibility—are present. Local researchers are seen as important not only because they contribute epistemological access due to cultural proximity, but also because they "bring into the spotlight issues that are almost never present when the topic is the Western Balkans" (Džuverović 2022, 6). "The epistemic locus" is on those "topics and themes ignored by Western scholars" (Musliu and Visoka 2019, 180). While these arguments relate to local researchers, I do not interpret them as (only) critiques of foreign/Western research, but as reflections on the limitations of intervention thinking—especially when "the ontological, epistemological and methodological positionality of local scholars" is also often "founded on Western thinking" (Musliu and Visoka 2019, 178).

Conceptualising these limitations in terms of fields of visibility and hierarchies found in them emphasises the responsibilities, potential, and limitations of all, rather than just "local," researchers in the common project of coeval engagement. The reason for this inclusion is not only a political argument against erasure, nor an empirical argument for a more "complete" picture of these processes. On the contrary, there is analytical potential in these expanded views as they help us better understand how local experiences are entangled with international intervention.

Actors along the Local/International Line

Orthodox understandings of intervention populate these fields of visibility with actors according to a surprisingly resistant binary: the local and the

international. The term "international" is often invoked not as a specific anarchical system of states, but as a vague conglomerate often termed the "international community." The international community, whether celebrated or castigated, is not made up of states only, but also includes transnational institutions like the EU and the United Nations, financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and international non-governmental organisations like Oxfam or Save the Children. The thing that unites the international community is its seemingly liberal quality. While there are those who rightfully contest this quality, even they agree that there is an understanding of international intervention as a liberal programme that is worth contesting. Liberal interventionism is understood as a "virtual phenomenon" or just a "myth" (Heathershaw 2008; Selby 2013), much like the mythical "international community" supposedly in charge of it (Bliesemann de Guevara and Kühn 2011; Kaczmarska 2016). Even though it is defined only in particular instances by referring to specific actors in different empirical contexts, it intuitively creates its opposite—the local. Whether real or not, it is by mixing with the local that liberal peace can turn into either a failed project of illiberal government or into a more positive hybrid or post-liberal outcomes.

While the international is represented by intervention itself, the local requires some conceptual legwork to be brought into existence. It is at the same time imagined as having the opposite of liberal values, but it also needs to become useful for achieving precisely those values. This local input is imagined in terms of everyday practices and resistance. The local turn thus sees the local as having a particular quality and as a container that holds the emancipatory potential for countering inappropriate, heavy-handed, top-down approaches (A. Mitchell 2011). The central question of the critique of liberal peace coming out of the local turn thus becomes how to open that container—or "how best to 'access' all *other* narratives so far silenced by the predominance of imposed *liberal* blueprints of peacebuilding, development and emancipation" (Randazzo 2016, 1353, emphasis added). We turn to the local in search of something other than liberalism. Sometimes this is in search of alternatives to liberalism, and at other times it is to locate those small pockets of local subjects that embrace liberal ideas arriving via state-building and peacebuilding projects.

This binary allowed for the emergence of a large body of critical work, denouncing the actions, lack of legitimacy, and attitudes of the international, and moving to the local as a road to more emancipatory futures. The existing literature on this move is vast, but the steps are surprisingly simple: international designs are deemed unfit for local contexts, and the local turn

is thus supposed to tap into the everyday, informal, and resistant to produce friction. This process would result in a departure from grand international designs and result in something hybrid, something often imagined to be more locally appropriate, and more emancipatory (Björkdahl et al. 2016b; Mac Ginty 2011; Richmond 2011a). While there are scholars who have detailed the development and limits of such approaches to the local (see Bargués-Pedreny 2018; Randazzo 2017), I want to highlight that representations of the local—and projects of reconstruction more generally—must reckon with understandings of it as both a pathology and a possibility. On the one hand, representations of local populations invite intervention and explain its failures. On the other, they can provide the local input needed for a better future.

The reliance on the local/international binary is not surprising in the context of inequality in which most interventions unfold. In Southeast Europe, the problems of understanding "local" subjects, identities, and experiences are exacerbated by Balkanism: a discourse that organises representations of the Balkans and the attitudes and actions towards it (M. N. Todorova 2009). In short, the Balkans' essentialised characteristics—corruption, nationalism, violence, backwardness—are readily available to both inspire interventions and justify their inability to usher the region into an era of modern prosperity (see Hughes and Pupavac 2005; Sampson 2002). The perceived distance from the liberal utopia of Western Europe acts as an East-West civilisational slope that structures the continent through European or imperial difference, "the less overtly racial, more pronounced ethnic, and distinct class hierarchies" that account for the "relations between European empires and their (former) subjects" (Boatcă 2012, 134).

The term "local," then, becomes a stand-in for less-than-European and other-than-liberal subjects. This context makes representation paradoxically difficult. On the one hand, it is surrounded by the dangers of epistemic violence that tend to simplify, exoticise, and homogenise Balkan places and people. On the other, it is invested in the promises of countering hegemonic narratives by capturing "something else." Importantly, both of these uses juxtapose the (Balkanised and Orientalised) post-socialist subject to Western liberal modernity. This erases heterogeneity within the Balkans, removing, for example, the powerful prejudice of rural spaces and peasants, or the often-violent racialisation of Roma and Muslim populations, from view. In the rest of the book, I thus build upon scholars who have highlighted these complex positions in decolonial takes on the Balkans (Gržinić, Kancler, and Rexhepi 2020), and uncover different ways in which global hierarchies are localised.

Liberalism: The Elusive Aim of Intervention

Beyond association with the elusive "international community," liberalism emerges as the commonsensical aim of intervention projects. It is therefore the third aspect of intervention thinking I want to address. In critical, problem-solving, academic, and policy approaches, interventions seemingly have as their goal the promotion of liberalism itself. This is captured most clearly in the concept of "liberal peace" understood as "democracy, rule of law, and market economics" (Campbell, Chandler, and Sabaratnam 2011, 1). Under these three simple concepts a spate of goals emerges: free elections, transparent institutions, respect for human rights, a limited role for the state and the rollback of welfare policies, a functioning and strong civil society, privatisation of public goods and institutions, the deregulation of capital and labour markets, and many more. Even though the idea of intervention as a coherent liberal programme is contested (Selby 2013), there is a wide understanding that this idea exists.

This liberal bias is particularly present in governmentality approaches to intervention because they present a specific vision of (neo)liberalism as government through freedom. While this approach helps us to understand the impossibility of locating subjectivities as somehow *outside* of power, it has also tended to overemphasise the subtle and indirect nature of that government, thus "downplaying or overlooking the presence of relations of force, violence and struggle" (Walters 2017, 61; see also Allen and Goddard 2014; Walters 2012; Death 2013). This is perhaps unsurprising: concepts illuminate at the expense of simplification. However, this particular simplification profoundly shapes how we understand the nature of liberalism.

It is not difficult to see that the whole world is not liberal. But instead of encouraging a rethinking of liberalism, divergences from freedom-oriented forms of rule are usually explained with two common moves that displace the lack of liberalism to "the international" or "non-liberal" spaces. The domestic/international binary allows liberalism as a universal idea to survive in a world where the international realm is imagined as an anarchical space and governed through non-liberal practices. The distinctions between "domestic" and "international" politics and contexts "are thus made responsible for the contradictory performance of liberalism" (Jahn 2013, 29). Non-liberal states, on the other hand, are placed on a linear line of backwardness headed for "development." Allochronism is crucial for explaining the existence of these non-liberal spaces. It allows us to imagine forms of government outside of "advanced liberal democracies" that depend on more coer-

cive measures as "revert[ing] *back* to something more basic" (Joseph 2010a, 225, emphasis added). In doing so, these approaches differentiate distinctive "levels of development" (Joseph 2010, 230) and inevitably fall back into thinking within temporally unfolding stages. As already discussed, this temporal othering underpins many theories of change, but it also functions more generally in the social sciences to explain differences between units. In the process, liberalism's "lurking internal others—poverty, violence, disorder" are removed from analysis (Blaney and Inayatullah 2010, 8).

Through the illusion of separation between liberal and non-liberal forms of government, liberal interventionism externalises its own failures. The fiascos of peacebuilding, development, and democracy promotion are "subsumed under the existing paradigm and consequently blamed on the policy targets" (Jahn 2007b, 221; see also Koddenbrock 2012). Shifting our thinking about these "failures" and "denigrations" as phenomena constitutive of liberalism complicates the usual conceptualisation of intervention as an encounter between "liberal peace" and "non-liberal" worlds (Rampton and Nadarajah 2017)—the non-liberal is always a part of liberal government. This also leads to new questions about intervention as a form of rule, and ways in which individuals become attached to it.

Some governmentality scholars have addressed this issue by depicting liberalism as a system trying to create a reality that it argues already exists (Lemke 2001, 203). Looking for this reality, or explaining why it does not exist, is therefore not enough. Instead, we may examine it as "a standard of reference against which all forms of life (individual, communal, political) can be assessed according to modern conceptions of civilisation and order" (Vrasti 2013, 64). Similarly, the neoliberal subjectivity implied in governmentality studies is not an anthropological fact that we need to confirm or dismiss (Madra and Özselçuk 2010, 487). Foucault never saw *homo economicus* as a finished project, instead treating it "as an *interface* between the individual and the government" (Madra and Özselçuk 2010, 485; Foucault 2008, 252–53)—an interface that translates human life into data comparable to governmental standards of reference. Following this line of thinking, the ensuing chapters move away from a success/failure view of subjectivation. Instead, I treat the ideal of a neoliberal subject as an interface through which people become known to projects of government. This standard of reference can be tracked through programmes and practices of government, and its effects are not confined to the diagnosis of success or failure, but have far wider consequences. These wider consequences become visible in coeval engagement with people and places experiencing them.

Cultivating Coeval Engagement

The importance of including local voices and knowledge in intervention design, implementation, and evaluation has reached a consensus across policy and scholarly work. Various strands of critical literature have worked towards this common goal with slightly different aims and tools. While developing important conceptual arguments and methodological and analytical tools, they also still push against the three definitional parameters of intervention thinking just discussed.

Post-colonial and Decolonial Takes on Intervention

Post-colonial and decolonial critiques of intervention bring two important contributions to the project of coeval engagement. First, instead of a world divided into the liberal present of the interveners and the illiberal past of those intervened upon, they emphasise their "long history of mutually constitutive relations" (Rampton and Nadarajah 2017, 442). This co-constitution is otherwise obscured by the fields of visibility on which interventions depend: problems and failures are construed as outside liberalism and explained away as remnants of the past. Second, decolonial scholars devise strategies for making non-Western experiences epistemically generative. This is most notable in Meera Sabaratnam's work (2017) on "reconstructing subjecthood" through "recovering historical presence" (39), "engaging political consciousness" (42), and "investigating material realities" of targets of intervention (45). Several authors have used similar approaches to embrace "a wider conceptual and longer historical lens" in the study of intervention, so that "themes come into focus that would remain hidden or ignored" (Turner and Kühn 2015, 4). These developments challenge established fields of visibility of intervention thinking both temporally (by considering longer historical processes and the exclusions traced in them) and analytically (by making the lives of societies experiencing intervention epistemically generative).

Even though this literature jostles the local-international binary by insisting on situated, rather than cultural, accounts of local experiences (Sabaratnam 2011b), there is little discussion of the construction of those accounts (Danielsson 2020). Foregrounding local experiences as epistemically generative paradoxically raises the stakes of representation as it imbues these experiences (and our representations of them) with emancipatory expectations. This can foreclose investigation of how these representations are implicated

in complex matrices of power; and it can also make difficult recognition of the multiplicity of local subjects that often fit neither narratives of "backwardness" nor decolonial hopes of progressivity. In the Balkans, there is an implicit expectation to critically deconstruct the hierarchy that posits Europe as superior to the Balkans. This, however, precludes engagement with the active and often ambiguous participation of subjects in translating this hierarchy both to non-European locations and domestically—issues that have been raised in relation to post-colonial approaches to the Balkans more generally (Baker 2018b; Bjelić 2018a), and to which I return in the context of intervention later on.

Local and Ethnographic Turns

The "local turn" literature explores "resistance," "hybridity," "friction," and "the everyday" of international interventions. It contributes to coeval engagement by reflecting on representational practices, breaking apart homogenising representations of local subjects, and developing methodological sensitivity. First, there is a wide recognition that "the local is both used and produced through practices of representation" by a wide variety of actors (Hirblinger and Simons 2015, 422). These representational practices, as well as "the field" on which they draw, are engulfed in the colonial undertones of representation (Richmond, Kappler, and Björkdahl 2015). Second, conceptual and empirical works demonstrate the complexity and heterogeneity of local actors that are often occluded by a "binary understanding of the international and the local" (Paffenholz 2015, 862). In turn, this literature goes on to "problematise the global/local dichotomy" (Björkdahl et al. 2016a, 1). It uncovers local stratifications along class, racial, gendered, and other lines (Iñiguez de Heredia 2018), and shows how they are affected by intervention (Lottholz 2022; Obradović-Wochnik 2018). Third, these conceptual developments translate into methodological strategies. The potential of ethnographic fieldwork is commonly recognised, and practical reflections on the conduct of fieldwork in areas of intervention abound (Bliesemann de Guevara and Bøås 2020; Mac Ginty, Brett, and Vogel 2021; Millar 2018). This literature emphasises the importance, and perhaps surprising difficulty, of taking "the subjects of our studies much more seriously, as people capable of making sense of and reacting to the structures of power they are embedded in" (Philipsen 2020, 151)—in other words, the difficulty of engaging them as subjects of coeval political life.

These approaches, however, end at the parameters of intervention itself.

Often, the focus is on evaluating the success of the local turn, or using community-level experiences to evaluate the success of interventions more broadly. Otherwise, scholars work to identify and give voice to "small acts" that contribute to peace outside (or below) interventions themselves (Mac Ginty, 2021). The latter, while not seeing the local as the opposite of liberalism, still see local subjecthood only in terms of liberal interventionism, ignoring other possible histories of different (liberal) positionings. While providing valuable tools for including local experiences in designing, implementing, and evaluating interventions, the concepts of the local turn were not quite comprehensive enough for the questions that I started with: What if taking my interlocutors seriously—reconstructing their coeval subjecthood—points to processes outside of intervention? What if their actions cannot be easily evaluated as contributing to either peace or conflict, but point to other aspects of international political life?

Political Economy of the Everyday

An emerging literature brings forth the economic dimension of liberal interventionism and studies economic reforms' manifestations in "lived realities" (Distler, Stavrevska, and Vogel 2019). Arguing for an "economic local turn," this literature brings into view the economic everyday as an element of the liberal agenda that is, despite many warnings, often left unexplored (Pugh, Cooper, and Turner 2008). In Sabaratnam's terminology, this positional critique moves away from judging the cultural misfit between international designs and local circumstances, and focusses on the materiality of the experience of intervention (Sabaratnam 2013, 272). It is also a way of including historical presence (as socioeconomic experiences are often made in comparison to a pre-war "before") and analyses of the targets of intervention themselves.

In Yugoslav successor states, where ethnicity and ethnic violence are often accorded empirical and analytical primacy, this approach has created space to engage a wider variety of experiences: the power of microfinance projects to shape women's agency (Stavrevska 2018); economic democracy in Yugoslav socialism that can serve as a site of reconciliation (Ramović 2018); the "interplay of precarization and privilege" that locally recruited staff of international organisations navigate (Baker 2014, 92); and ways in which transitional justice interventions erase socioeconomic violence and justice from the policy realm (Lai 2020b). In the coming chapters, I will contribute to this literature by discussing the political economy of political education and agricultural governance, but my aim differs. While this literature

investigates how economic interventions impact more "traditional" topics of critical peace and conflict scholarship (Vogel 2022, 8), I point to the limitations of those "traditional topics," showing the everyday political economy of seemingly non-economic interventions.

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This chapter showed how intervention thinking shapes what and how we see in spaces where interventions are launched. Intervention is a "gatekeeping concept" through which IR understands Southeast Europe, and we can examine both its background and its consequences. In Southeast Europe, international intervention is closely connected to "transition." While transition can mean political, economic, or conflict-to-peace transformation, its defining characteristic is a particular teleology that renders places knowable according to their position on a temporal route that leads to civilisation, proposing specific actions to help them progress along it. Admittedly, there are few(er) people nowadays who subscribe to the tenants of classical modernisation theory or are seduced by the easy diagnoses of what is "missing" from the recipe for functioning democracies—both practice and scholarly takes have come a long way. Yet allochronism persists.

While concepts such as dualism, evolutionism, and the denial of coevalness that results from them help us understand the wider context from which particular understandings of international intervention stem, the second part of the chapter focussed on its consequences. Fields of visibility—where we practically look for intervention—are entangled with long-standing assumptions of "who matters" in international politics. These combine to exclude "everyday" actors by focussing on both international and local elites to erase non-Western subjects from our scholarship. The temporality implicit in these fields of visibility also removes the historical connection and co-constitution that precede intervention and paints intervention as a novel and groundbreaking encounter between international politics and supposedly thus far isolated subjects. Finally, the repetitive nature of these fields of visibility leads to research practices that, on the one hand, "over-research" certain communities, often those most culturally, linguistically, and geographically accessible, and that on the other hand erase those that do not fit the predetermined categories of what matters.

These fields of visibility are populated by actors that we understand as local or international, despite the existing critiques of this binary. The chapter argued, and the rest of the book will demonstrate, that the focus on the local/international binary—even when we understand it as a target of critique—occludes other hierarchies essential for understanding political

experiences and their place in international politics. Additionally, the binary itself has led to a situation where the representation of the local must deal with the burden of understanding it both as a pathology and as an emancipatory resource.

Intervention thinking is still implicitly (and often explicitly) invested in liberalism as the end goal of "transition." The ordering power of liberalism as the goal of intervention is not exasperated by the often-obvious illiberal practices of interventions themselves, nor by their inability, or at least their recurrent failure, to achieve their liberal outcomes. Before showing how the experiences of people that are supposed to benefit from interventions push against these definitional parameters in the rest of the book, Chapter 2 first explains how I navigated these issues in my own research practice.

CHAPTER 2

Fieldwork beyond Intervention

After exploring how the conceptual parameters of intervention shape observations of political, social, and economic worlds, it is tempting to ask how researchers might, then, approach a place, a person, or a phenomenon while avoiding the dangers of gatekeeping concepts and allochronism. It is an important question, but also something of a dead end—methods are not simply tools for extracting data from a world separate from them, but are an integral part of, and even shape, the world itself (Aradau and Huysmans 2014, 598). This chapter offers an illustration of my own orientation while researching international intervention in Serbia. I not only present my methods, consisting primarily of participant observation and relational interviews, nor do I introduce the "facts" of Serbia as the space where my fieldwork took place. Instead, I place them together to highlight ways in which our research practices relate to research contexts. In addition, supplementary information about the methods I used can be found in the appendix.

The chapter has a threefold aim. First, it "tells the story" of my methods and methodology as a foundation for the material that follows. Second, and in parallel, it introduces the historical, political, social, and economic context of my research in a way similar to that in which I learned about it myself. Third, it illustrates a particular research sensibility that, even though it is not a "how to," can be useful for other researchers approaching intervention spaces. I use this entwinement of reflections on methods and secondary literature to counter the oft-found elevation of ethnography and fieldwork-based methods as somehow being beyond literary constructions or external discourses—more authentic, truer, and capable of existing outside of power relations. Instead, I want to point to their relationality and show how they develop in constant conversation with the existing literature and the researcher's positionality.

In her work on decolonising intervention, Sabaratnam (2017, chap. 3) offers three methodological strategies for "reconstructing the subjecthood" of the targets of intervention: recovering historical presence, engaging political consciousness, and investigating material realities. I employ them in the rest of the book. In this chapter, I also want to expand on these strategies by engaging the wider context within which they are used. There are existing historical narratives that await us when approaching any place, we position our own engagement with subjecthood alongside and against both scholarly and policy analyses, and we translate these meta-methodological orientations into things we do: talking to people, attending events, or reading reports.

I want to emphasise the uncertainty, contingency, and messiness that accompanies this research process. This is not to say that my methods developed independently from the literature on qualitative and interpretive methodologies, but to show that how we choose and develop from the methods available to us is contextual and malleable. The separation of the knowledge coming from fieldwork from "tales" of actual fieldwork has been challenged both in ethnographic work (see Kušić and Záhora 2020a; Rabinow 1977; Van Maanen 2011) and in intervention scholarship (Bliesemann de Guevara and Bøås 2020; Mac Ginty, Brett, and Vogel 2021). While I hope to add to this growing literature, my aim is not (only) to provide a more honest account of the research process. I am wary of reflexivity that assumes we can know ourselves or understand our choices fully (Kurowska 2020).

Moreover, even though my research relied on ethnographic methods (participant observation [and observing participation], document analysis, and relational and ethnographic interviews), rethinking intervention as a politics of improvement does not demand a specific method. Rather, it offers a tool for conceptualising the agency of intervention's targets beyond intervention, at diverse intersections of local and global politics. With this in mind, I use this narration of the entwinement of my methods and objects of study as the beginning of an argument that develops throughout the book. This argument is that the tensions between our empirical and analytical practices are inevitable and productive, especially if we strive to learn from, not just about, the people, things, and processes we encounter in fieldwork. These tensions show the limitations of seeing like an intervention and point to political lives outside of its frames—political lives that are embroiled in the politics of improvement within and beyond intervention. This chapter proceeds in four sections. In the first section, I define ethnography and present it as a sensibility with particular tactics.[1] The following sections then

1. I stay away from discussing ethnography as a form of writing. While I would agree with

address the historical narratives, scholarly and public debates, and reflexivity within which I used my methods.

Ethnography as Tactics and Sensibility

Defining what ethnography is and does is a surprisingly controversial endeavour, so controversial that it is not uncommon to accuse ethnographic works in IR of missing "the classical virtues of ethnography" (Philipsen 2020, 151) and adopting a "selective, instrumental and somewhat timid understanding of what ethnography is and does" (Vrasti 2008, 280). I understand ethnography as a sensibility, something that has been referred to as a particular stance, imaginary, or orientation (Lippert and Brady 2016; Ortner 1995; Pader 2006; Schatz 2009), with three main aspects. First, by recognising that the main data collection tool is the researcher herself (with theories, concepts, situatedness, and emotions), ethnography abandons the "view from nowhere" and recognises that all knowledge is produced from a particular location (Haraway 1988; Harding 1992). Second, it is oriented towards the social world and material objects but pays special attention to the meaning-making work that goes into creating them. This allows us to appreciate not just human experiences more fully, but also how they are made through different forces that underwrite them. Third, my understanding of relations with interlocutors does not focus on intimacy or closeness, which are celebrated in ethnographic accounts, but on what Tim Ingold (2014, 390) referred to as *correspondence*, that is, "correspondence with those with whom we learn or among whom we study, in a movement that goes forward rather than back in time." It is a stance that strives towards coevalness but is "neither given nor achieved but always in the making" (Ingold 2014, 389).

The uses of ethnography in existing intervention and development research can be grouped into two camps. First, ethnography has been used for decades to examine the translations between development and intervention blueprints on the one hand, and the real life of institutions implementing them on the other (Lewis and Mosse 2006; Mosse 2005; 2011; Autesserre 2014a). Second, ethnography helps follow the subsequent translations and their effects which take place in specific local outcomes. As Mil-

those (like Gilbert 2020) claiming that this form never erases the "I" of the researcher, there are also differences between writing in IR / political science and anthropology that go beyond authorial positionality.

lar (2014) argues, it is impossible to understand the "friction" between plans and outcomes of international interventions without understanding local interpretations of key concepts that drive those interventions, such as peace, dignity, or reconciliation.

While I share with these approaches an interest in the malleability of practices and concepts as they travel across locations and are scaled up and down, my use of ethnography is slightly different as I focus upon different benefits of an ethnographic sensibility. With an almost consensual understanding of liberal international interventionism as a governmentalising project in critical statebuilding and peacebuilding literatures, ethnography enables us to see the incompleteness of those processes. It moves us away from the "textual bias" that many studies of governmentality operate with and has the potential to uncover the complexity of outcomes, including resistances and (mis)translations (Brady 2015; Hansson, Hellberg, and Stern 2014; Howell 2015).

Additionally, because ethnography depends on sustained contact, it provides the time and the connections that are the starting point for seeing people as coeval and complex subjects. In Ingold's words, it opens the space to "join them in correspondence." The importance of this project cannot be overstated in a field that, as I argued in the previous chapter, depends on relegating the targets of intervention to the *less important past*. While ethnography is under no circumstances either the only or a sufficient tool for this shift in thinking, its extended and "slowed down" temporality opens the space needed for alternative encounters and imaginations. In a way, this sense of time runs counter to accounts of fieldwork as solitary, dangerous, and powerfully intimate (Hanson and Richards 2019; Kušić and Záhora 2020a). Instead, the potential of ethnography, at least in this book, lies in the long and often boring days of being physically close to, and learning from, our interlocutors.

Within this umbrella sensibility, I employ particular tactics: participant observation/observing participation; ethnographic and relational interviews; approaching documents as artefacts; archiving; and reading.[2] While I conducted more interviews in the field of agriculture to compensate for fewer opportunities for participation (see the appendix), I used interviews extensively in both fields. Not only did they complement participant observation, but I approached the interviews themselves as ethnographic. I asked questions that go "beyond the immediate concerns of the research question" and "probe

2. Here I expand on Kunda's (2013, 14) reflections on tactics and "becoming an ethnographer."

biography" (Forsey 2010, 568). This both informed existing questions and led to their modification (Forsey 2010, 568; see also Hockey and Forsey 2012; H. L. Johnson 2012; Spradley 1979). Ethnographic interviews are similar to relational interviews in that they have the aim of "learning about the interviewee's world from the 'inside,' through their own experiences, knowledge, and beliefs" (Fujii 2018, 7). The difference, however, is that ethnographic interviews rely on sustained relationships that go beyond the interview (Fujii 2018, 7). In my fieldwork, the boundaries often blurred: some relational interviews turned into lasting relationships, while some ethnographic relationships included relational interviews. Importantly, some interviews were one-off events and never became part of a working relationship, while others were failures fraught with misunderstandings and confusion.

Very often, this type of interview also involved sharing my own opinions. This is in line with an interpretivist approach to interviewing that is always relational and depends on data being "co-generated" in research relationships (Kurowska and Bliesemann de Guevara 2020; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). While "traditional" methods training instils a fear of "contaminating" data and "leading questions," my fieldwork encounters often made dialogue a space of creation: in informal interviews, my interviewees asked me questions to feel more comfortable, even when my answers highlighted our differences. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this was rarely the case with more elite interviewees, who were used to the interview dynamic. For example, when attending a semester-long course in political education, I initially limited myself to taking extensive notes during class discussions. Very soon, however, both the course coordinator and the participants explicitly asked for more involvement: the former was aware of my personal and professional experience on the topics we discussed—EU integration, mobility, democratisation—and my colleagues and I started to share breaks and small talk. These might seem like banal interactions at best, or data contamination at worst, but they were also small spaces of joining in correspondence: allowing my own opinions to be scrutinised in ways not completely dissimilar from the way I approach the opinions of my interlocutors in this book. After a while, it seemed natural to "show" some of my own positions to my interlocutors when my work (and the career it was supposed to lead to) depended so much on analysing theirs.

I also read policy documents as ethnographic artefacts. It seems commonsensical to argue that policy documents are "poor representations of program realities" (Li 2010, 235), yet the presence of text becomes overwhelming as soon as you enter an NGO office. In her defence of using policy texts, Tania Li emphasises that they have effects because they inspire

practices and that they "reveal an ethos, a way of defining problems and connecting them to solutions" (2010, 235). I am less sure about the causation between text and practice—we cannot know whether the text *inspired* policy or was created to *legitimise* an already set solution. Moreover, any policy recommendation nowadays relies on governmental ideals of market competition, efficiency, transparency, and individual accountability. Is the neoliberal ethos in them a reflection of the authors' lifeworlds, or is it meant to tick the donor's boxes and secure funding? I thus read policy documents and NGO publications as ethnographic artefacts: I learned about how and by whom they were created, how they were justified, and what purpose their authors intended for them. At times it was the *ethos* in them that I analysed, while at other times it was the discrepancy between the ethos and the material reality that provided insight.

I both archived and translated the material I collected. Drawing on Emerson et al. (2011), I kept digital and handwritten notes and an extensive fieldwork journal. Most of the interviews were recorded and interviewees provided written consent. However, once I started researching land policy, people were more reluctant to sign any documents. I then used the oral consent procedure and relied on writing extensive interview notes. Archiving in my case also involved translation. I selected the locality of my study partially based on my own language skills, so I naturally acted not only as translator between my interlocutors and this text, but also as a translator from Serbian to English and vice versa. Without going into the field of translation studies, it is obvious that this adds another layer of representation to the text. All BCMS (Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, Serbian) translations are mine, unless stated otherwise. If I found some phrases important and not easily translatable from BCMS to English, I have added the original in BCMS in Latin script in parentheses.[3] I have also chosen to emphasise words and phrases that are used in English. Many words and phrases are used in English and then hybridised by attaching BCMS grammatical prefixes and suffixes. When possible, I have chosen to keep those forms as they show how language reflects the domestication of different concepts.

Finally, I also read far beyond IR, and often beyond academic texts, both to find traces of the subjects I am interested in and to pursue the issues that my interlocutors deemed important. This is what Millar (2014, 63) talks about as "ethnographic preparation"—engaging with anthropological literature on the topics we are interested in to help us understand how people

3. I have chosen to use Latin script rather than Cyrillic because both are recognised as national scripts in Serbia, while Latin is accessible to a wider international audience.

experiencing peacebuilding operations make meaning. In my case, this was even more important as the people I was interested in are largely missing from both IR and political science. This made me turn to anthropologists, who are cited throughout the book, but also to other texts important for understanding youth and agricultural life in Serbia: films, novels, and daily media. Engaging with multidimensional texts helped me appreciate the historical presence of my interlocutors before, during, and after the post-war intervention. An orientation to subjects goes beyond fieldwork-based approaches. I have written elsewhere about the importance of generative readings in the project of reconstructing Balkan subjects from existing IR scholarship (Kušić 2021). Reading is thus not a passive, but a generative project that allows engagement with different subject positions.

While these tactics helped me recover historical presence, engage political consciousness, and investigate material realities of people living in spaces of intervention, they were also used within and against existing images of the intervention space and its people. The following three sections address three dimensions in which these tactics unfolded: among existing representations of regional and Serbian history, within well-established scholarly and policy analyses, and as a part of my relation to the region and my interlocutors.

History and Its Representations

A narration of Serbian history usually starts with the many state formations that it was a part of. It was part of the Byzantine, Ottoman, and Habsburg empires and has had many names, orders, and rulers. I also start here because this inter-imperial history is crucial for understanding how histories, spaces, and people of Southeast Europe are represented in both public and academic discourses. Serbia functioned as a kingdom from the twelfth to the fourteenth century, until it was conquered by the Ottoman Empire. In the most general terms, during much of the Ottoman period the south of present-day Serbia was ruled by the Ottomans, while the northern parts of contemporary Serbia, now known as the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, were ruled by the Hapsburg, and then Austro-Hungarian, Empires. Following a series of revolutions in the early nineteenth century, the part of modern-day Serbia located within the Ottoman Empire became an independent principality in 1829/1830 and was recognised as an independent kingdom in 1882. It was joined by Vojvodina when they became part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes—the so-called First

Yugoslavia—was created in 1918. In 1929, it was renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and it existed as such until the Axis power invasion in April 1941. During World War II, Serbia was partitioned and most parts of it occupied by different Axis powers, while central Serbia was controlled by the Serbian government installed by the German occupation.[4] The Second Yugoslavia was born after Word War II under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito, who led the partisan resistance against the Axis powers during the war. Democratic Federal Yugoslavia was proclaimed in 1943, and even though the king recognised it, the monarchy was abolished in 1945 and the country was renamed as the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia in 1946, when the communist government was established. It first sided with the Eastern bloc, but after the Tito-Stalin break in 1948, Yugoslavia pursued its own specific vision of communism that differed substantially from the Soviet system in both domestic and foreign policy (see Kirn 2019). In 1963, the country was renamed once again, as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

This history and its representations were always made in encounters with the empires and powers that surrounded and at different times governed parts of Serbia, shaping the identities and relations of those involved. Even though the politics of representation are marked with "continuity and change, repetition and variation" (Doty 1996, 13), we are nevertheless presented with a ready-made selection of images and concepts that orient our ideas of what the Balkans are (Abazi and Doja 2016a; 2016b). This representational discourse has been examined through studies of Balkanism. Inspired by, but differentiated from, Said's Orientalism, the term Balkanism was developed by Maria Todorova to denote a "specific discourse [that] moulds attitudes and actions towards the Balkans and could be treated as the most persistent form or 'mental map' in which information about the Balkans is placed, most notably in journalistic, political, and literary output" (2009, 192).[5]

Said's influence in critical studies of Balkanism cannot be overstated. Today there exists a whole subfield that deals with representations of the Balkans as bloody, volatile, backward, and in need of supervision (Abazi and Doja 2016a; 2016b; Baker 2018b; Fleming 2000; Njaradi 2012; Obad 2013a).

4. I cannot do justice to the significance of this era for contemporary politics in Serbia and the region. A book by Jelena Đureinović (2020) offers a detailed account of memory politics in contemporary Serbia.

5. In addition to Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans*, other foundational works are Dušan Bjelić and Obad Savić's (2002) edited volume *Balkans as a Metaphor*, Andrew Hammond's (2007) *Debated Lands*, and works that deal with East Europe more generally, such as Larry Wolff's (1994) *Inventing Eastern Europe*, and Attila Melegh's (2006) *On the East-West Slope*.

On the one hand, this literature brings to the fore the impressive work of the images of the Balkans, their sources, and embodiments. But on the other, the fact that the encounter between studies of Southeast Europe and post-colonial thought works in the mode of analogy—by drawing parallels between Southeast Europe and spaces that were colonised by European powers, and between exclusions suffered by people(s) from the Balkans and the racist oppression of non-white people—is deeply problematic (Baker 2018b, 9).

There are two main issues on which Todorova distances herself from Said. First, Orientalism refers to a "discourse about an imputed opposition," while Balkanism refers to "a discourse about an imputed ambiguity" (M. N. Todorova 2009, 217). Second, Todorova (2009, 12) points out that Said never wanted to argue for or to reveal the Orient's "concrete historical experience," but she sought to do so through historiography of the Ottoman Empire. While there is no space to discuss the many far-reaching consequences of such an understanding (but see Bjelić 2018a), this analogy and its contours also affect efforts to reconstruct Balkan subjects in intervention literature (see Kušić 2021). This ambiguous position requires us to constantly hold together the fact that the "post-Yugoslav region has been subject to imperial rule" and at the same time "has also benefited from global racialized hierarchies and further perpetuated them internally" (Stavrevska et al. 2023, 8).

Southeast Europe sits uneasily within the project of reorienting knowledge production towards non-Western experiences, as this literature usually implies (post-)colonial and racialised subjects—experiences that are far from straightforwardly present in Southeast Europe. The analogy between Balkan and post-colonial experiences has led to a situation where much of the post-colonial scholarship in/on Southeast Europe is steeped in racial and colonial exceptionalism: it sees the Balkans as overdetermined by the material and cultural hegemony of Europe but fails to address the *active* participation of Southeast Europe in creating and upholding structures of coloniality. In its semi-peripheral position, the region reproduces European modernity in striving to attain it (Boatcă 2012), making the positioning of the Balkan subject as "subaltern" difficult, to say the least (Baker 2018a; 2018b).

Somewhat paradoxically, at the same time as claiming a resemblance to colonial situations in the Global South, the work of Todorova's Balkanism is also a claim to European belonging and, implicitly, its associated whiteness. As Dušan Bjelić (2018b; 2022) extensively explored, Todorova's differentiation from Said rests on her belief that Orientalism articulates difference between two racial types, while Balkanism produces a difference between the *same* racial type. Todorova's argument then becomes one for the inclusion of the Balkans in "Europe" and rectifying its mistaken othering—something that

not only inspires the interventions launched, but is an attitude reproduced in local critiques that argue for inclusion based on "belonging to Europe."

While I do not engage with the racialisation processes in the Balkans the way that Baker and Bjelić do, I build onto this literature as I move away from trying to grasp how the Balkans are (re)imagined by Europe in intervention projects, to pursuing a more nuanced understanding of the work of "Europe" in the Balkans. Despite the long and overlapping imperial histories in the region, I do not claim that peacebuilding and statebuilding projects in Serbia are colonial situations per se (bearing in mind that the international administrations in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Kosovo resemble colonial rule more). There are a number of authors who analyse the EU as an empire (Behr and Stivachtis 2015; Böröcz and Kovács 2001; Böröcz and Sarkar 2005; Zielonka 2010). I consciously stay away from this frame. While the study of colonial and post-colonial regimes of rule offers insightful ways of approaching other hierarchies, not all hierarchies can be reduced to colonial situations.

But even without concrete colonial situations, intervention projects can be seen as attempts at governing that depend on particular representations closely entwined with long imperial histories. Thus, they become an important part of trying to understand the intersections of Yugoslav post-socialism and global post-colonialism (Karkov and Valiavicharska 2018; Kušić, Lottholz, and Manolova 2019; Majstorović 2021). More than deconstructing representations or debating the (non)existence of something more real, I examine the "materiality of Balkanism"—not only how it is produced, but how it translates into specific projects of government and their effects (see Rajaram 2015, 89–90). Instead of seeing it "only" as a reference point against which Southeast Europe is measured, I see Europe as a powerful idea employed for the creation and perpetuation of hierarchies within the region. This highlights the ambiguous position of Southeast Europe within coloniality: simultaneously "in pact and proximity of Euro-American coloniality" and "its product and defying periphery" (Gržinić et al. 2020, 18).

Scholarly and Policy Analyses

Representations of history are an important part of the discussion about the wars in the 1990s. Balkanist interpretations of the 1912–1913 Balkan wars served as a foundation for the interpretation of the "new wars" of the 1990s (Abazi and Doja 2016a; 2016b; Hajdarpašić 2009; Hansen 2000). These interpretations then translated into prescriptions for and against interven-

tions. While the scales of these interventions were then unheard of and now serve to illustrate a particular instance of the liberal hubris of the 1990s, they also built upon a long tradition of seeing the Balkans as naturally needing, if not welcoming, intervention (Hammond 2006; Sörensen 2002; Woodward 2013). In reviewing these dynamics, I want to further highlight the consequences of representations of history and examine the types of subjectivities born out of these imaginaries.

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia officially ended in 1992. Croatia, Macedonia, and Slovenia declared independence in 1991. BiH did the same in April 1992, leaving the so-called Third Yugoslavia, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia made up of Serbia, Kosovo (still a part of Serbia), and Montenegro. The wars of this period mark policy, public, and scholarly imaginations. The war crimes, rapes, genocide, and other atrocities happening among neighbours and families were televised, studied, and discussed broadly. It is impossible to write a concise history of the conflicts—even an introduction to the literature would be the size of a book (see Baker 2015). In short, the label "the wars of the Yugoslav succession"[6] actually covers five different conflicts: the conflict between the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Croatia (1990–1995), the short intervention of the Jugoslovenska Narodna Armija (Yugoslav People's Army) in Slovenia in 1991, the wars in BiH that saw Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim), Croatian, and Serbian sides at war with one another (1992–1995), the 1998–1999 war in Kosovo, and the conflict in Macedonia in 2001. While Serbia was involved in all but the Macedonian conflict, only the controversial NATO bombings (March 24, 1999, to June 10, 1999) that sought to prevent further war crimes in Kosovo took place within Serbia itself (see Fridman and Rácz 2016).

The discourse surrounding the wars is highly politicised, and the explanations of the causes of the conflict are themselves the subject of multiple studies (see Baker 2015; Bieber, Galijaš, and Archer 2014; L. J. Cohen and Dragović-Soso 2008; Jović 2001). While the majority of accounts focus on ethnicity and nationality as the main factors in the conflict, critical scholars have explored a spate of other aspects: the structural weakness of the Yugoslav state engraved into the 1974 constitution, which worked towards decentralisation (Baker 2015, 22); the economic decline reflected in the paradoxical socialist unemployment and exacerbated by the 1973 international oil crisis and the subsequent refinancing of debt under the IMF's guidance (Woodward 1995a; 1995b); and the mismanagement of the crisis by Western European countries and the United States (Baker 2015, 53).

6. The name itself is debated. See Ramet 2014.

Because the wars and their aftermath were spectacular, the difference between Yugoslavia as a socialist country and the current European aspirations of its successor states is often exaggerated. Yugoslavia practised its own form of state socialism, and it was economically and politically more open to the outside world than the rest of East Europe. After the break with Stalin in 1948, Yugoslavia's socialism was based on social, rather than state, ownership and on an economic democratic ideal of self-management (see Horvat [1976] 2016; Unkovski-Korica 2016). Yugoslav socialism, revamped by Edvard Kardelj, worked towards the "withering away" of the state and opened space for a larger role of the market, seen as superior to both Soviet state socialism and American state capitalism (Bockman 2011).[7] This created a system fraught with contradictions and led to social cleavages supposedly absent from socialist societies (see Archer, Duda, and Stubbs 2016). More than just a different economic system, the reworking of ideology also led to more independent media, less repression than in other communist countries, and more open dissent (Uvalić 2010, 30).

Contrary to the usual narrative of communist isolation, Yugoslavia was also politically and economically highly integrated with the world. Its foreign policy navigated the fine line between the United States and the USSR, with Tito founding the Non-Aligned Movement along with Gamal Abdel Nasser and Jawaharlal Nehru (see Stubbs 2023). Economically, it was open to trade and finance, and it served as the first experiment in structural adjustment with the IMF-sponsored austerity programme beginning as early as 1981 (Uvalić 2010, 17). So, while Slobodan Milošević's Serbia—with its sanctions and NATO bombings—did raise a generation of Serbians in isolation in the 1990s, treating the post-2000 era as the region's first experience of international markets or liberalism would be misleading.

Highlighting this history can help better understand the historical presence of my interlocutors and their local and global positionings. In her recent book on the socioeconomic dimension of transitional justice, Daniela Lai (2020b, 45) discussed the post-socialist condition "through the prism of people's memories of the past." In her account, post-socialism is "a way of making sense of change and of injustice, by remembering—selectively—some features of life during socialist Yugoslavia." In other words, the post-socialist condition is not a temporal designation of something that comes

7. While the nuances of Bockmann's work and the wider implications of this argument are beyond the scope of the current discussion, even this quick overview demonstrates that the approach to neoliberal reliance on markets and decentralized self-regulation should be problematised. Condemning markets as "new" and "imposed" prevents inquiring into how they historically develop.

after socialism, but "a relation to that legacy, often in the form of a need for it to be overcome by embracing neoliberal capitalism" (Kojanić 2020, 51). These memories of Yugoslavia are not confined to national or regional scales, but include different ways that people understand themselves within international politics—a key issue that emerged in my fieldwork and to which I return throughout the following chapters. It is not only history that matters, but interpretations of history that are always made between the local and the global.

Beyond explaining the conflict, different interpretations of the causes of the wars also inspired the great peacebuilding efforts launched in the wars' aftermath. Taking place in the context of post–Cold War liberal hubris, the post-war interventions in BiH and Kosovo set a precedent for the "extensive model" of post-conflict intervention later practised globally. Moreover, the field of transitional justice mushroomed after the set-up of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY)—the first international war crimes court after Nuremberg and Tokyo.

Even though Serbia was the country with the highest number of indictments at the ICTY,[8] the reconstruction efforts in the country itself seem relatively small. While BiH, Kosovo, and Croatia, to some extent, saw the launch of great peacebuilding operations, the international community's approach to Serbia in the 1990s was largely punitive until the removal of Milošević in 2000. Even after the restoration of ties to the West, Serbia received neither concrete international attention like BiH or Kosovo nor EU membership like Slovenia (2007) and Croatia (2013). By 1995, Croatia and BiH explicitly oriented themselves towards the EU ideals of parliamentary democracy and free market capitalism. Serbia, on the other hand, remained with Slobodan Milošević in power under a quasi-socialist system. For many Serbians, the 1990s are remembered for record-breaking inflation, in which a predatory state was not only corrupt but sought to extract foreign currency from its citizens, and as an era of increasing unemployment and inequality (Uvalić 2010, 68–71, 125). In 2000, Serbia's GDP was only 47 percent of the 1989 GDP—and 1989 was already a year of great crisis in Yugoslavia, with an annual inflation rate of 1252% (Uvalić 2010, 21, 125).

In the 1990s, Serbia went through multiple rounds of varied political and economic sanctions (May 1995–October 1996, and then again in 1998–1999); lost memberships in all major international organisations, which were resumed only in the early 2000s; and was late to sign the Stabilisation

8. The ICTY officially closed on December 21, 2017. Out of 161 persons indicted, 96 were Serbian.

and Association Agreement (SAA) for the Western Balkans that was initially signed in June 1999. The renewal of membership in IMF and the World Bank depended on the division of Yugoslavia's debts and assets among the new states and was thus postponed until Serbia depended on the membership for loans used for both reconstruction and paying off "old Yugoslav debt" in an attempt to access new credit (Uvalić 2010, 84, 120–21, 126–27).

Despite this isolation, the final removal of Milošević is often attributed precisely to international democracy assistance. It is during this era, the late 1990s, that Serbia's superstar democracy promotion status was born. While Milošević was consolidating his power by eradicating free media and stealing elections, the international community, led by the United States, embarked on a vast project of democracy promotion. The peaceful "revolution" happened on October 5, 2000, after Milošević refused to acknowledge the results of the presidential election won by Vojislav Koštunica. Besides removing Milošević from power, it had profound consequences beyond Serbia: it inspired similar "coloured" or "electoral" revolutions across East Europe and the Caucasus, and demonstrated the efficiency and importance of democracy assistance (Bunce and Wolchik 2011).

While space prevents looking more closely at the ambiguous status of what are today referred to as the "October Changes," it is important to note that despite the controversial NATO bombings of 1999, it is "democracy assistance" that got the credit for the fall of Milošević (Bunce and Wolchik 2011; Spoerri 2014). This assistance consisted of seemingly mundane efforts like education, training, and material resources given to three major actors: opposition parties, independent media, and civil society actors (Spoerri 2014). Even though Kosovo and BiH are examined as popular examples of the liberal peace project, it was Serbia that, at least for a while, captured the popular imagination. Milošević's downfall was seen as an effective symbiosis of international support and rebellious local actors, celebrated in publications such as the *New York Times* and *Foreign Policy* (see R. Cohen 2000; Rosenberg 2011).

Even though the 1990s were an extreme period in the whole of the region that once made up Yugoslavia, focussing only on the wars as a radical disjuncture ushering in a "post-Yugoslav" era hides as much as it illuminates. Most obviously, it occludes the pre-war international connections already noted above, but it also allows the misreading of the current political situation in Serbia. The term "revolution" was problematised soon after the October Changes, when people realised that the changes were not as profound as everyone believed they would be. This does not mean, however, that things stayed the same. The economic dimension of the reforms was driven by a

belief in neoliberal technocracy as preached by the Washington Consensus. Starting in the early 2000s, these reforms were sometimes implemented through IMF's conditionality and in-kind help that took the form of "expert technical advice," and other times by overzealous Serbian technocrats acting in accordance with World Bank and IMF ideals (Uvalić 2010, 130–33).

Even though the reforms initially showed a growth in GDP, it was a "jobless growth" that characterised many transitional economies and had a "devastating impact" on the general population (Uvalić 2010, 132, 149). It is this socioeconomic breakdown that is often left out of accounts of the changes in post-Yugoslav spaces. In these narratives, the gravity of social, political, and economic changes mentioned above, which far transcend issues of ethnic, national, and religious coexistence, is lost. Interventions (and their internal critiques) that focus on peace, transitional justice, and ethnic and religious coexistence ignore that "peace" also depends on a strong welfare state, steady employment, and a vision of the future as a process of betterment, rather than survival. A desirable future is often invoked in terms of "normalcy" (see Jansen 2006). The economic changes—and the socioeconomic violence that was a part of them—were not only profound, but also underappreciated because of the overall attention given to transitional justice and political conditionalities associated with the ICTY (Uvalić 2010, 129; see also Lai 2020a; 2020b).[9] This difference, between "survival" as the contemporary state and the "normalcy" that was Yugoslavia, permeates anthropological studies of the region and my own fieldwork (see Gilbert et al. 2008; Greenberg 2011).

In 2003, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia changed the structure of the union into a "state union" under the name of Serbia and Montenegro. In 2006, Montenegro proclaimed independence and left what is today Serbia and its complicated relationship with Kosovo. Even though Serbia has not been effectively controlling Kosovo since 1999, Kosovo declared independence in 2008. After 2000, Serbia witnessed a large-scale (if dispersed) state-building project that encompassed both political and economic transformation. Political reforms are framed by the process of EU integration that has, perhaps paradoxically, been seen as both indispensable and exhausted for a long time (Chandler 2007; 2010a; Keil 2013; Stahl 2013). Serbia officially applied for EU membership in December 2009. It was granted candidate status in March 2012, negotiations officially started in January 2015, and first chapters were opened in December 2015. While Serbia is commonly

9. For the politics of transitional justice in Serbia, see the detailed accounts in Ostojić 2014 and Subotić 2009.

described as "failing to Europeanise" and the causes of that failure are widely explored (Subotić 2010; 2011), the changes have been profound even without a tangible "success." EU political interventions' effects are visible in government, civil society, and public perceptions—issues that the following chapters discuss in detail.

Most civil society actors and many of the people I spoke to evaluate the political situation in the country as deteriorating. During my fieldwork, people who actively opposed Milošević in the 1990s described Serbia as sliding back into a not-so-covert authoritarianism: key people from the Milošević government are once again in seats of power, with the prime-minister-turned-president Aleksandar Vučić having been minister of information under Milošević (1998–2000). In the years since my fieldwork, things have only gotten worse. Vučić's ruling party, the SNS (Srpska napredna stranka—Serbian Progressive Party), is accumulating and consolidating power, and there is a notable decrease in freedom of the media and political pluralism. The Serbian government refuses to recognise the statehood of Kosovo and celebrates its growing closeness to Russia and China, while at the same time reforming every aspect of state bureaucracy under the EU's guidance and developing economic plans with the IMF that follow the usual orientation towards export-oriented growth, privatisation, and welfare cutbacks. Overall, there is a mood of "social discontent" (Džuverović and Milošević 2020).

Subjects of Transition

The previous chapter discussed the denial of coevalness embedded in the notion of multidimensional "transition" that Serbia and the region are supposedly still undertaking. This transition brings together a triple transformation: towards peace, towards market capitalism, and towards liberal democracy. More than specifying the end goal, narratives of transition include images of subjects and their deficiencies that international intervention should, and does, act upon. Narratives of economic transition weave together lagging economic indicators, promises of market capitalism, and images of faulty subjectivities. The recession that developed along with the global 2008 financial crisis was particularly acute as EU integration efforts made Serbia vulnerable to the Eurozone crisis, but still did not make the country eligible for bailout funds (Bartlett and Prica 2013; Panagiotou 2014). Serbia is characterised not only by worrying statistics, but also by contestation around those numbers. For example, even though the official

unemployment rate fell from 19 percent to 16 percent in 2016 (the time of my fieldwork), the "real rate" was considerably higher because the official statistics include informal employment and ignore the negative population growth induced by negative birth rates and emigration. Similarly, the "official" average monthly income of circa EUR 550 gross (around EUR 410 net) in 2016 is also disputed as being drawn mostly from bigger companies and large cities. This unnaturally inflates the figures and ignores the vast numbers of people who receive the legal minimum wage, those employed informally, and those employed without regularly receiving their salary (a practice still common in the region) (Bradaš 2017, 9–10).[10] While the government is increasingly seen as more responsive to external requests than domestic issues, everyday concerns have been articulated by grassroots movements and protests (Džuverović and Milošević 2020).

These difficulties stand in contrast with the expectations that the post-communist shift to capitalism would be both comprehensive and rapid (see Wedel 2009). The delay is explained through a familiar narrative that "attributes economic dysfunctionalism to societies" and does not consider possible "dysfunctional economic precepts, structures and conditionalities" of global governance (Pugh 2005, 24). The discussion around local "dysfunctionalisms" also involves visions of individual subjects: local subjectivities need to transform in order to successfully practice capitalism. In the words of Margaret Thatcher, reprinted in an edited volume on subjectivities in changing economies, "Economics are the method, but the objective is to change the soul" (Makovicky 2014, 1).

The discussions on the "post-conflict" nature of the Yugoslav space invoke a different set of subjectivities. Most obviously, because it is assumed that the Balkans are naturally inclined to violence—either because of "ancient hatreds" and an ontological predisposition to violence, or as the consequence of the rule of many different empires—ideas of "supervision" are never far from the international political imagination. The solution to the threat of sliding from post-conflict back into conflict emerges in the form of "soft imperialism" or "necessary empire," as noted by Robert Kaplan in an opinion piece in the *New York Times* (2017; see also Ignatieff 2003). The assumed natural propensity to violence means that war continuously

10. This publication calculates the average at EUR 470 gross (EUR 340 net). However, it is important to note that even if the higher numbers are true, they are still not enough to cover the consumer basket from the same period, which came in at EUR 570—meaning that the gross salary needed to cover it is more than EUR 800. Conversations with people I encountered during fieldwork in Belgrade and Novi Sad support the thesis that the official numbers are vastly exaggerated.

looms, making the erasure of that violent agency an undramatic solution to an exceptional problem.

In addition to being post-Yugoslav, post-socialist, and post-conflict, Serbia also works within the "post-communist" label (often mistakenly confused with post-Soviet), whose framings are particularly powerful in the realm of civil society. Perhaps most obviously, this framing provides a recipe for democracy promotion through civil society—something that was supposedly completely absent during communism, and something without which democracy cannot function (see Bojicic-Dzelilovic, Ker-Lindsay, and Kostovicova 2013; K. Brown 2006). There is a consensus around the diagnosis of "structurally weak and culturally deficient" civil society in East Europe, measured through (low) rates of "civic engagement" and "political participation" (Baća 2022, 5). This makes post-communist civil society, where nonformal youth education is located, simultaneously the object of intervention and a tool for intervening in political parties and the public. Local subjects are diagnosed with "apathy" and lack of "civil involvement," and offered "participation" and "building civil societies" as solutions. It is then not surprising that critical scholars in the region describe this process as "repressive infantilization" that created the "children of post-communism" (Buden 2010, 18). The ensuing interventions, especially in BiH and Kosovo, used images familiar to colonial and developmental tropes to understand regional problems as "growing pains that will disappear under supervised 'normalisation'" (Jansen, Brković, and Čelebičić 2016, 3).

In making these myths of transition explicit, my aim is not to confront them with reality and expose them as wrong. They matter for my analysis because they point to the importance and historical longevity of images of places, histories, and people that shape not only how we see the Balkans as a region, but also how we approach the people living there—a key concern both for projects of intervention and for scholars who seek to reconstruct the subjecthood of those who live with intervention.

Aware of Self and Curious about Others

I was careful about encountering others, but I also reflected on my own imbrication in the processes I studied. While my choice of a region to study was pragmatic to a certain extent—the time/funding constraints made it almost impossible to achieve the language and cultural fluency needed for an ethnographic approach in a location where I do not have existing proficiency—it is also undeniable that the questions I ask are

posed from an autobiography largely situated in the same region. Comparing the worlds built in the literature with my own experiences motivated both curiosity and critique. This brings to the fore the "question of location" from which knowledge is constructed (see Gupta and Ferguson 1997a, 23; Rich 1986).

Importantly, the interrogation of the politics of location that I suggest does not have a definitive end where the researcher "becomes aware" of her position and is able to "manage" it correctly. Too often, texts introduce discussions of positionality—or lists of demographic data such as gender, race, and ethnicity—as evidence of having "dealt with it." The implicit aim of such accounts is "fading into the background," even while remaining aware of how our "biological, sociological, and personal characteristics might orient data collection and analysis" (Autesserre 2014a, 278, 285). This approach is limited because it does not challenge the idea of objectivity, but argues for a "strong method" better able to achieve it (see Harding 1992, 462–63). I try to remain aware of the importance of positionality, without buying into the myth of truly knowing one's position fully.

My connections with my field of study are prominent. I grew up in what is today Croatia, in a region that shares both a border and a history of war with Serbia. I travel with a Croatian passport that has free access to the EU (unlike a Serbian one), and my Croatian accent and dialect display my background in every conversation I have in Serbia. However, while these facts made me a foreigner of sorts in Serbia, my language familiarity, and cultural proximity, marked me as one "studying home" among colleagues in international academia (Greverus and Römhild 1999; Kürti and Skalník 2009; Narayan 1993).

The problems and potentials of doing ethnography "at home" are widely discussed. In short, researchers travelling home to do research enter a double bind: they are either accused of lacking objectivity or expected to speak the truth of their communities (Gupta and Ferguson 1997b, 17). The YugoslaWomen+ Collective has used Jana Bacevic's (2023) work on epistemic positioning to further detail this bind. They show that scholars coming from the Yugoslav space are first subject to what Bacevic calls "bounding," as they are "continuously being questioned about their biases due to the perceived proximity to the region," and then "domaining," with their "knowledge claims being at best perceived as particularistic" (Stavrevska et al. 2023, 10).

While this bind is very real, I want to discuss a different point and challenge the epistemological underpinnings of these discussions. Most obviously, the idea of "native ethnography" is also underwritten by methodological nationalism: the idea that nation-states are containers of cultures to which a

belonging automatically makes us a "native" can only survive while fetishising the nation-state. Put most simply, even if I was doing research with agricultural producers in the villages around my hometown in Croatia, I would still not be a "native'—the worlds they inhabit and build are still different despite our geographical proximity, and an ethnographic stance enables us to both recognise and learn from these differences. A good example of this relates to the language that we use in the field. Jon Harald Sande Lie (2013, 215), for example, worked in the World Bank in an English-speaking environment, but still had to learn another language—the "developmental idiolect." Similarly, I had to learn specific subsets that related to agricultural issues, EU-speak, and non-formal education, even though BCMS is my first language.

Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, the idea of "native ethnography" is also based on a problematic understanding of authenticity and transparency. The "ideology of authenticity" refers to the idea that "native" scholars represent themselves and their national histories and culture *faithfully* because of their insider-ness (Appadurai 1988, 37; Narayan 1993, 676). This commitment to authenticity is shared by both positivist and more critical approaches. The former operate with a limited understanding of ethnography as a "data-collection machine capable of accessing unmediated reality in all its authenticity and accuracy" (Vrasti 2008, 281). In IR, this understanding is understandably attractive. In a discipline where projects and expertise are condemned for not being context sensitive, the statement "I've been there" guarantees legitimacy—the idea that we know because we have somehow experienced the "real" local circumstances (Bliesemann de Guevara and Kurowska 2020; Kušić and Záhora 2020b). This is not dissimilar to how "firsthand" knowledge is used as a legitimising tool in policy circles (Bliesemann de Guevara 2016; 2017).

In critical approaches, such access to difference is tempting in efforts to challenge the status quo of academic production that posits the Western experience and academe as the relevant objects and subjects of knowledge (Tickner 2003; Sabaratnam 2011a). As one realises how much knowledge is shaped by who the knower is, authenticity is ever more cherished: it promises different worldviews, a relief from Eurocentrism, and a counter-narrative to Western experiences (both through researchers positioned differently and through their fieldwork encounters).

I have thought and written about my own "claims" to authenticity and my navigations of authorial positionality (see Kušić 2020). Rather than expecting any specific access to authenticity, I treat my own "insider-ness" as relational and ever changing. As such, it is not available to "local" scholars any more than those with biographies that start elsewhere. This is best illustrated through an example. When arriving to Belgrade after being loaded

with the anxiety of the double bind described above, I was at the same time shocked and relieved when people asked me how I was finding my way in a *foreign* country. The difference was not articulated only between the perceptions of my UK/international colleagues who saw me as going "home," and fieldwork participants who welcomed me to a foreign country and commented on my accent, but could also oscillate within one conversation. It became common that people would consider me foreign while comparing Croatia and Serbia: the corruption in Serbia is at a level that I cannot imagine in Croatia, the unemployment is more dire, the state is more authoritarian. However, once the conversations involved Western Europe or the United States, I soon became local enough to understand things that Western Europeans simply could not, and the "we" expanded to include me—*they* cannot understand how *we* function here. As Stavrevska et al. (2023, 10) also note, "In Global North academia, we are more often retracted into 'Balkan-ism' as our originary point, whereas in 'the field' we are retracted to our (perceived) ethnicities." These observations not only point to the ambiguity of my own location, but demonstrate the relational character of all locations and their effects, issues that I return to throughout the book as I address questions of belonging and hierarchies as constitutive parts of experiences of interventions.

Our position also changes as we form relationships during fieldwork. My own relationships largely did not resemble the inspiring stories of activist research, collaboration, and political alignment (e.g., Anupamlata and Nagar 2006; Coleman 2015). Some relationships developed into sustained productive engagements, while other interactions remained limited, were fraught with misunderstandings, or ended quickly. I always aimed for what Lee Ann Fujii refers to as a "working relationship"—not necessarily rapport as "harmony" or "closeness," but a relationship built on treating interlocutors "as ends in themselves, rather than as means to an end (the 'end' being the book, article, or dissertation the researcher is writing)" (Fujii 2018, 15, 13). While accommodating the reality of fieldwork with my admittedly more idealistic expectations required ongoing effort, it was made easier by methodological discussions that focused on research relationships beyond closeness.

Refocusing away from harmony or closeness went hand in hand with letting go of the idea of "authentically" representing any one opinion. I personally disagreed with many of my interviewees, and this posed a natural limit to more collaborative relationships. For example, some of the young people I interviewed did not hesitate to share explicitly homophobic views in interviews with me. I often decided to not overtly challenge them, but these revelations also kept me from developing the relationships further. Even the "resistance" that is often romanticised when exploring non-Western spaces

can take unpalatable forms. As Chapter 6 will show, the resistance to land grabs that I encountered was not always composed of smallholders and farmers, as the literature would have us think, but often led by either elite (rich) local actors or organisations that aligned with right-wing politics.

Even though I was varyingly considered "local," my point of view was naturally different from those of my interlocutors, even when we ostensibly "agreed." While I was aware of critical studies of Balkanism and cautious of "othering" the Balkans as corrupt or prone to violence, the people I spoke to rarely had such concerns. I was more likely to examine processes within global flows and narratives, while my interlocutors were concerned with what the Serbian state did or did not do, and how that was influenced by transnational forces. Perhaps most importantly, it was much easier for me to critique specific processes as products of neoliberal capitalism without the pressure of radical right-wing politics that have in many ways hijacked anti-imperialist politics in Serbia and East Europe at large. While highlighting these differences means moving away from rapport, harmony, authenticity, and transparency as guiding principles for discussions of positionality and ethnographic methodologies, I think it also helps us approach our interlocutors both analytically and ethically. It can help situate our positions in relations to theirs, and allows for coeval engagement, even in disagreement.

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While the previous chapter examined some of the limitations of "seeing like an intervention," this chapter presented my own research practice that pushed at the limits of those frames. Methods are often imagined as standing above and separately from the world they inquire in. Ethnographic methods are supposed to provide "more authentic" and "real" data with which we challenge existing representations. To counter this artificial separation, this chapter presented my own methodology together with the world of which it is a part. I not only defined ethnography as a particular sensibility that can introduce subjects and processes otherwise erased, but also showed how that sensibility is practised as we encounter history and public and scholarly analyses, and relate to our interlocutors. The next four chapters present the insights gleaned from using this sensibility to research the experiences of international interventions in non-formal youth education and agricultural policy.

CHAPTER 3

Subjects and Effects of Non-formal Education

Young people are natural targets for projects that aim to bring about peace, democracy, and economic development. Their rebellious nature can be treated as the cause of problems, while their creativity and potential are imagined as solutions. This chapter examines programmes meant to help youth become politically active and learn to be better citizens. My entry point are various programmes of non-formal education (NFE)—a realm of education differentiated from both formal education, which is structured from preschool to higher education, and informal education, where the person learns individually and spontaneously. In NFE, learning is structured but happens outside of formal education: these are the many seminars, schools, and events on democracy, reconciliation, human rights, participation, and civil society that a surprisingly large number of young people attend all over the post-Yugoslav space.

Shortly after arriving in Serbia, I attended a week-long workshop in a city in the north of the country. The week was organised as a "training for trainers" on the topic of youth work and social inclusion—a special type of event within Erasmus+ that is supposed to raise the next generation of workshop trainers. Erasmus+ is the offspring of the EU's Youth in Action (2007–2013) programme, which "aimed to inspire active citizenship, solidarity and tolerance and involve young people in shaping the future of the European Union."[1] Even though Serbia has its own history of NFE that we will get to later in the chapter, Youth in Action and Erasmus+ can be credited for popularising NFE all over the continent.

I was unsure about my participation in this programme because I

1. Space prevents an analysis of NFE and youth work in general as a field, but for a brief overview of EU involvement and the current debates, see European Commission (2015).

thought of myself as lacking experience as a "youth worker." However, both the application process and the makeup of the participants quickly showed that my worries were unwarranted: experience in youth work was not high on the agenda. While relieving my own anxiety, the realisation that the title of the workshop was *not* the actual agenda left me wondering what was. The "What's the point?" question that began in Istanbul and that I recounted in the introduction loomed large. Despite the lack of clarity, I travelled north. We were put in a dilapidated hotel on the outskirts of a small city, fed subpar food, and had session after session in a room of the otherwise entirely unoccupied hotel.

"The point" of the week was mentioned in passing by Maja, one of the three facilitators, in the opening session. After presenting the schedule and the official aims of the week, she told us that she and the other facilitators were "there for us" all week and invited us to use their comprehensive knowledge of Erasmus+ to give our projects a "European dimension."[2] The content of this European dimension became clear only after attending many other similar events (funded by the EU and otherwise): it determined both the permissible *aims* that we might focus on and the *acts* used for achieving them.

In the opening session, we were invited to draw a poster of inclusions and exclusions that we found particularly problematic in our home countries. A girl from Macedonia drew a shoe to illustrate the expanding textile industry in Macedonia in which women can easily be paid less per month than the cost of one pair of the shoes they produce for export. The textile industry has become a notorious employer in the region, as the Clean Clothes Campaign repeatedly shows (see Musiolek et al. 2020; Tamindžija, Aleksić, and Musiolek 2017). A young man from Italy drew a map of the famous boot to show us how the unification of Italy led to structural inequality between the developed north and the lagging south of the country. A young professional from Greece highlighted how one of the effects of the Eurozone crisis in Greece was the EU literally stopping all funding for Erasmus+ activities—a powerful illustration of the Greek position in the Union. Coming from the perspective of governmentality studies that detail processes of individualisation and depoliticisation, I was surprised: these illustrations showed acute understandings of structures of domestic, European, and global politics and an interest in discussing them, which directly contradicted stories about "depoliticised" civil societies and "individualised" youth.

2. The discussion of this event is based on my fieldwork journal from January 2016 and recordings of the interviews with participants.

Yet such topics were firmly outside the borders of permissible discussion during the workshop. We were not there to talk or worry about such "structural" or "state" issues. In the last session, we were to develop solutions for problems of isolation with the new tools we were given. Marko, a very young but also very ambitious man from Bosnia and Herzegovina, was part of a small team that was tasked with devising solutions for geographic exclusion. Marko attended an international school in his hometown and was not afraid to express his opinions in English. In this session, he combined his ambition and schooling to come up with an idea of FDI-led road construction. He presented the idea enthusiastically: if people are geographically isolated, let us build them a road! Maja, our trainer, was visibly annoyed—on this last day of the workshop, have we *still* not learned *what is fundable*? She was as exhausted as we were, and frankly showed her annoyance with a rhetorical question: "In which of your countries do NGOs build roads?" This was clearly outside of the scope of civil society, and we should therefore not be thinking about such ideas.

People looked down. Even though this was *non*-formal education, we easily occupied the roles of *formally* "bad students." Marko remained silent. To save his idea by at least starting a discussion, I mentioned that NGOs might actually have a role: they could organise a campaign to demand the road, start a petition, or design and implement a public awareness project that would show the importance of a road and build support. Marko agreed, but the topic, just like all "state" issues throughout the week, was quickly dropped.

These short examples capture a larger delineation of *aims*, *acts*, and *actors* of political change. Instead of containing dangerous "youth bulges" (as in many post-conflict spaces), projects working with and on young people in Serbia focus on their lack of initiative in both political and economic matters. For example, a recent study funded by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung describes young people as "ignoring the role of societal institutions, as well as their own responsibility, for the position in which they find themselves" (Popadić, Pavlović, and Mihailović 2019, 3). They are said to lack interest in "changing the society in which they live" and in politics generally (Popadić, Pavlović, and Mihailović 2019, 3). This creates a field of visibility where apathy is a particular problem, and political education a specific act of intervention to ameliorate it. A local subject—a young person who needs to be taught democracy and thus be "activated"—is created. This fits the wider diagnosis of "structurally weak and culturally deficient" civil society in East Europe, measured through (low) rates of "civic engagement" and "political participation" (Baća 2022, 5). Post-communist civil society, where NFE is

located, is simultaneously the object of intervention, and a tool for intervening into political parties and the public.

As the example with Marko shows, governmentality worked through the workshop as a particular practice of negotiation and discussion that fosters the idea of citizens (and the NGOs they supposedly participate in), rather than institutions, as responsible for change. The same interpretation can be found in the only (to my knowledge) previous ethnographic engagement with NFE's political dimension as part of statebuilding efforts in Serbia (and the region): Theodora Vetta's (2019) *Democracy Struggles: NGOs and the Politics of Aid in Serbia*. She describes a week-long training in Serbia as a "social intervention on the terrain of self-formation" (Vetta 2019, 51). The workshop she attended still runs annually under the same sponsorship, but I decided not to attend it, to get a wider variety of participant experiences. By attending seminars that are explicitly more political, like those organised by German political foundations or those dealing with transitional justice, I had insight into NFE as a part of a larger governmental formation.

In her discussion of NFE, Vetta points to a common interpretation of youth-oriented programmes in critical scholarship that see NFE as a site of governmentalisation: a place where subjectivities are formed, politics defined, and issues demarcated. In other words, we find strict ideas of acts, agents, and aims of intervention. She argues that the seminar she attended was not just promoting entrepreneurialism and taking responsibility, but "was also demarcating the choice and the possibilities of the action itself" (Vetta 2019, 51–52). I observed similar dynamics: every conversation that might have led into discussions on redistribution—whether in terms of labour rights in Macedonia, regional inequality in Italy, or roads in BiH—was silenced. We were supposed to think in terms of cultural centres, photo exhibitions, and craft fairs. In my observations, as well as in Vetta's, the possibilities of action were tied to micro-projects, cultural topics, and vague "tolerance."

Yet the story of NFE is not a story of young people all over Serbia, the Balkans, or Europe, remade into perfect neoliberal subjects. The process is messier and far less complete than a governmentalisation lens might lead us to think. In this chapter, I use observations from workshops like the one retold above to expand our understanding of what intervention is, how it works through particular images of "local" subjects as the target of reform, and what the consequences of such narrowly defined acts are. On the one hand, this provides a much-needed explanation of *how* governmental power is launched through specific images of the local, and the seemingly mundane practices designed to respond to them. On the other, this chapter compli-

cates such readings by highlighting how messy their effects are: stubbornly incomplete and paradoxically attractive to young people.

The chapter proceeds in two sections. The first section breaks apart the homogenous "local" to show different ways that the political subjectivity of young people is conceptualised. It further works towards reconstructing historical subjecthood of NFE participants in Yugoslav socialism, in the democracy promotion that helped bring down Milošević, and in post-2000 initiatives supposed to help people become democratic citizens. The second section of the chapter moves from discussing images of the local and the interventions they inspire to examining their wider effects. Here I raise two larger points. First, the supposed depoliticisation that happens through NFE and civil society "NGOisation" (Alvarez 1999; 2009)—the professionalisation of civil society away from social movements and grassroots organisations and into NGOs—has very political outcomes and consequences in reshaping the relationships between citizens, civil society, and the state. Second, I argue that encountering depoliticising governmentalities also requires asking why those rationalities might be desirable to people, instead of treating them as having been duped by global neoliberalism.

NFE, Youth, and Government

In Serbia, NFE was especially important due to its role, alongside young people, in bringing down Slobodan Milošević in 2000 (Wolchik and Bunce 2006). It entered the main stage of democracy aid with the cultural turn in democratisation studies that emphasises social capital and participation as key in democratic transitions (Greenberg 2010, 51). This approach, popular among scholars and practitioners, includes civic education as a standard element of the democracy aid portfolio based on the paradigm of transition (Carothers 2002, 17). In this view, democratic institutions and processes are no longer enough for democracy; transitional societies are in need of new democratic subjects—subjects that NFE can provide by initiating young people into a democratic culture and "correcting" cultural factors such as apathy, nationalism, and bitterness, which cause democratic failure (Greenberg 2010).

NFE did not end once the story of youth bringing down Milošević left the public discussion. On the contrary, in the last decades, youth globally emerged as a focal point for international donors who see them as capable of bringing peace, development, and democracy. We can observe this

in "empowerment projects" for marginalised groups (Eliasoph 2011), in state programmes that seek to create a particular type of citizen (Hemment 2015), in efforts to theorise young people as important actors in everyday peacebuilding (Berents and McEvoy-Levy 2015), and in youth as targets of post-conflict economic interventions (Wai 2021). While the popularity of these policies may lead us to think that the political role of young people and policies to engage them are novel, they are actually layered upon and interact with older engagements of youth with power. To understand the current hopes for young people in Serbia, it is necessary to relate them to the Yugoslav project of building political youth and the role that young people played in the transition to democracy.

Youth in Yugoslavia

When Maja, the workshop facilitator from the story above, asked who builds a road, her exasperation was underlined by a strong common-sense answer that excluded both youth and civil society. Yet the road I regularly travelled to Belgrade was built by a different constellation of actors: through a state-managed voluntary youth labour action (*omladinske radne akcije*— [ORA]). ORAs saw more than two million young people complete several infrastructural projects from the 1940s until the last ORA in 1990, including the "Brotherhood and Unity" highway on which I travelled. The motto of the ORA, "We build the highway, the highway builds us" (*mi gradimo autoput, autoput gradi nas*), however, points to stakes much higher than free labour. The work actions served to build socialist citizens with the spirit of "brotherhood and unity." With time, and especially after the 1960s, ORAs' official goals and the reasons for youth attendance started to vary greatly. Despite the official rationale of hard labour, short working hours and opportunities for learning and leisure meant that most people came to have fun and enjoy their summers (Popović 2010, 280, 287–90). These actions also had an important international dimension, with E. P. Thompson famously participating (see Thompson et al. 2020). More than just facilitating alliances by spending time together, these actions were supposed to erase the divisions between the urban and the rural, the poor and the rich—all young people were supposed to come together in building a common future for "socialist new men"[3] (Popović 2010; Vejzagić 2013; Senjković 2016).

3. Despite gender relations and the "women's question" being a top priority in the Yugoslav project, the project always remained a project of new *men*. There is not space to explore

I do not bring up this history to (further) romanticise the Yugoslav project. As already discussed, this recovering of historical consciousness (Sabaratnam 2017) is both a political and an analytical move. Besides making space for the subjectivities that are usually erased, it also helps us understand how contemporary projects are developed in conversation with past efforts to engage youth. While examining state-led projects in contemporary Russia, Julie Hemment (2015, 12–13, 78), for example, emphasises that even though these projects function within a very specific narrative of Russian national greatness, the projects themselves could not be understood without inquiring into how they have built on international democracy promotion projects that targeted youth in the 1990s. I thus turn to young people in Yugoslavia with a twofold aim: first, to denaturalise the common sense of "who builds a road" and to point to larger configurations of political power that underline it, and second to challenge the temporality of NFE as a supposedly "novel" intervention in the realm of youth subjectivity. As we shall see, NFE activities in Serbia build on a long history of acts that had as their goal subject formation, and those formations were often imagined on an international, rather than simply a "local," level.

Contrary to accounts that see the focus on youth as a novel move of neoliberal capitalism, youth were one of the constitutive pillars of socialist society in Yugoslavia. As the famous motto "Tito, Partija, Omladina, Armija" (Tito, the Party, the Youth, the Army) shows, young people were a crucial element of the Yugoslav socio-political landscape (Spaskovska 2017, 38). The development of the socialist citizen was a managed process: children in primary schools became *pioniri* (pioneers), and after seven years they became *omladina* (youth). They were targeted by youth labour actions (ORAs), taught politics in political schools, and treated as "unique and important political subjects in their own right" by the federal youth organisation and its branches (Carter 1982; cited in Greenberg 2014, 26).

The highly institutionalised sphere of youth politics within the party, and the political schools it operated, were sites of subject formation. Although only rarely mentioned in the literature, veterans of NFE, in interviews, presented socialist political schools as the direct antecedents of the NFE industry that emerged in the 1990s. Young people in Yugoslavia also practised their politics in student and youth organisations that were technically a part of the state apparatus. Ljubica Spaskovska (2017) details how these networks were both *products of*, and actively *participated in* creating, the social and

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the nuances of these tensions, but many of them are addressed in the feminist literature in/on the region.

political landscape of late socialism in the 1980s. While functioning within the state apparatus, they also provided a platform for the critique of the regime and what they saw as failed attempts at socialism. They demanded *more* socialism: better self-management, less corrupt bureaucracy, more freedom of speech, and more employment.

These organisations made space for political subjectivities inspired by internal criticism of Yugoslav socialism, but also by international and transnational issues. After 1968, new global social issues like environmentalism, pacifism, and LGBT+ visibility became a part of what was originally imagined as solely a youth branch of the party (Spaskovska 2017, 126). Young people enacted their geopolitical position using issues like environmentalism and sexuality as links to a common feeling of "Europeanness" (Spaskovska 2017, 126). It is onto this rich history of government practices and political debate about everything from youth apathy, unemployment, and sexuality to their place in the party and the state and the overall makeup of what is supposed to be a good life that democracy promoters and their NFE activities landed in the late 1990s.

Even the specific format of NFE was popular in socialist Yugoslavia. A manager of a large NFE provider reflected:

> Now, in relation to this non-formal education, this is very—since I am that generation from socialism [*ta neka generacija iz tog socijalizma*], this non-formal education is not, how do I say, related to only this period, because, especially, this part of political education was present in youth [party] organisation. . . . We had, practically, a whole . . . a structure that did this. . . . So this political socialisation is not a product of modern times, but, simply, there was this political socialisation. . . . I often laugh when I see those programmes . . . and now, "How do you conduct a meeting?" We did all this thirty and more years ago. (Interview, Belgrade, March 16, 2016)

This historical consciousness challenges the "novelty" of NFE by invoking its important role in Yugoslav political socialisation. This is a common feature of interventions that "take an idea or concept out of one historical or institutional context and repurpose it to serve the goals of intervention" (Gilbert 2020, 16). But NFE as a part of socialist political life is different from the accounts of the 1990s that focussed on working against, rather than with, the regime. Importantly, they both differ from the way that NFE is experienced today.

Democracy Guerrillas against Milošević

> Some time ago . . . Let's say in the last decade, when you would come to [the organisation] you were a little revolutionary [*mali revolucionar*] and desired change. Now you are an individual fighting for yourself.
>
> —Interview, Belgrade, April 7, 2016[4]

When talking to people managing and implementing NFE and other civil society activities in Serbia, I observed a palpable difference between those who came to be employed in civil society through their involvement in internationally aided protests of the 1990s, and younger people who came to it in the last decade. Here I focus on the former. While talking to people who started their civil society careers in the era of democracy promotion, I was always presented with a juxtaposition of the *apolitical present* with the very *political past*. In that past, I was told, subjects of NFE were not bogged down by paperwork, did not compete with project plans, and did not have to account for how they spent the international funds given amidst evacuations and closures of embassies.

In her book on the role of democracy promotion in the ousting of Milošević, Marlene Spoerri (2014, 119) emphasises that "the bombing of Serbia was followed by a bombardment of aid." Her phrase captures the dramatic extent of democracy aid given to Serbia in the period leading up to October 2000. These efforts led to the celebration of the Serbian "revolution" as proof that helping democracy from the outside can work, and the "bulldozer revolution" became a model emulated around the world.

NFE was an important part of the intense funding of civil society and capacity building that took place in the preparation for ousting Milošević. Otpor! (Resistance!) and other groups opposing the regime were heavily aided by democracy promoters from Europe and the United States, a relationship that was often embodied in NFE activities. For example, the European Youth Centre in Budapest became an important meeting point for youth NGO activists in an era when Milošević did not allow NGO development within the country (Vidanović 2006; see also Ilić 2001). More generally, many NGOs "explicitly linked alternative pedagogy, critical thinking, democracy, and the anti-Milošević movement," and NFE became a site of "active citizen engagement" (Greenberg 2014, 94). As shown in the quota-

4. Interviewee is an alumnus of one of the organisation's courses and is now employed as the coordinator of two courses, one of which I attended as a participant observer.

tion above, back then, even entering a building where an NFE provider was housed was something of a political statement—a positioning of oneself against Milošević and with Europe and the West.

These revolutionary subjects were nothing less than what *The Guardian* called "democracy guerrillas" (Traynor 2005). The stories of suitcases of cash that were smuggled across the border in times when foreign donors were not allowed into the country are striking because they show a perception of the aid recipients as politically mature. This framing of young people as both capable of and crucial for political change is a part of the global narrative of youth as revolutionary subjects. This narrative begins from early twentieth-century Europe and moves through the 1960s counter-movements to the Arab Spring uprisings (Sukarieh and Tannock 2015, chap. 4). Similar framings and actions connect Otpor!, and the NFE activities it once received (that its former members now provide), with the coloured revolutions of East Europe and the protests in Tahrir Square (Abul-Magd 2012; Rosenberg 2011; Spoerri and Joksic 2011; Sukarieh and Tannock 2015, 103).

The powerful international/local binary emerges in and profoundly shapes accounts of political action nurtured through these "political" NFE activities. Many discussions of the coloured revolutions, the agency of local youth, and the international support they received easily turn into arguments about whether those revolutions were truly local or were imported. It is not completely surprising to read Zeinab Abul-Magd (2012, 567, 570) describe the events in Serbia as "staged" (in her comparison with Egypt). This debate was addressed in Serbian academia as well. It is best captured in the exchange between Slobodan Naumović, who wrote a text about Otpor!'s foreign support and classified it as an "imported revolution," and Zagorka Golubović, who challenged his conclusion and methodology. Interestingly, the debate not only concerns Otpor! but also asks who should speak for the region (Golubović 2007; 2008; Naumović 2006; 2007).

While this is an unsurprisingly contentious issue, it is useful to think about these events through a positional, rather than cultural, critique. While a cultural critique aims to assign agency to local or international actors and assess their cultural compatibility, a positional critique investigates the effects of the events and their framings (Sabaratnam 2013). In this case, a positional critique uncovers that the curious joining of local and international dynamics before and during the year 2000, and their subsequent framings, shaped broader ideas of what it means to "do politics" more generally. One of the results of framing youth as the revolutionary subject is the occlusion of other actors and processes that were crucial for political action.

The myths of brave Otpor! activists—interpreted as either a celebration of Serbian bravery or a condemnation of American imperial designs—occlude the incredibly diverse coalition that came together to bring down Milošević. These were not just urban youth, but provincial workers who went on strike, technocratic, neoliberal parties that formed the new government, extreme nationalist organisations, and even the notoriously conservative Serbian Orthodox Church, which called on the military and the police to respect the will of the people (Stojanović 2001).

Another effect uncovered by positional critique is highlighted in Jessica Greenberg's (2014) study of student university politics in the 2000s. She shows how a crucial part of political life in Serbia after the regime change was the translation happening between values and narratives consolidated in democracy promotion as a particular intervention, and the local practice of democracy (Greenberg 2014, 18). This translation continued into the 2000s and redefined political action in terms of both permissible aims—issues that were considered both possible and desirable—and the acts appropriate for achieving them. It is this translation, or afterlife, of democracy promotion that came to dominate NFE, and intervention more generally, in Serbia.

Political Children of Transition

While aid generally, and investments in NFE specifically, did not stop after regime change, their subjects changed. As democracy persistently stayed out of reach, the same revolutionary youth who brought down Milošević with a mix of humour, bravery, and international democracy assistance were redrawn as lacking that revolutionary and democratic spirit and in need of further education on how to "do democracy." Suddenly, things like critical thinking and politics—seen as preexistent and needing only material support in the 1990s—were thought to be lacking and in need of externally aided development. The diagnosis relied on issues of political culture and subjectivity: political culture was deficient, and people failed to act as citizens in a democracy. Accordingly, the subjects of this newfound tutelage embodied in the ideology of transition needed to be taught "participation" (Greenberg 2010; 2014, 88), and the process of maturation was very quickly termed "Europeanisation." This not only moved international intervention to the realm of individual subjectivity that needed to be "activated" in order to bring about a liberal polity, but also introduced a specific set of inter-

vention acts through which this process was to proceed. The goal became "building capacities": teaching the necessary skills and values through NFE. From being democracy guerrillas, Serbian youth (and adults) quickly became political children.[5]

The maturation needed to happen both in party politics and among the general public. In party politics, NFE focussed on youth as a long-term investment in the development of a party culture (Spoerri 2014, 133, 143–44). Spoerri specifically argues that democracy assistance might have hurt Serbian politics and prevented parties from developing "meaningful political content," despite all the "ideology building" provided by German *Stiftungen* and British party foundations. Despite possible failure, these courses, workshops, and trainings still happen through funding from various political foundations. They are open to the public but target "future leaders," who are usually already active in party politics, to equip them with knowledge, skills, and networks needed for their coming political careers. Because every German party operates its political foundation with the primary goal of providing "diverse political education," I attended events on a wide political spectrum.

There is surprisingly little literature on the activities of German political foundations despite their overtly political goals and omnipresence. The little research that exists focusses on the impact of the foundations on party politics (Vorbrugg 2015 is an important exception). The literature seems to draw the conclusion that German political foundations have little or no effect because the parties and unions they support fail to become significant political actors (Erdmann 2006; Dakowska 2002; Phillips 1999). I disagree on two points. First, in party politics, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation provided important legitimacy to SNS (the ruling party in Serbia). By facilitating access (even if just symbolic) to the German government and the EU, the foundation supported the image of Vučić as a competent leader who is bringing Serbia "back to Europe." Second, outside of party politics, these foundations seem to be crucial in supporting more systemic research and activism on alternative visions of government. While I do not want to judge the effectiveness of these actions versus their obvious entanglement with the political economies of civil society in the region, their effects need to be carefully considered before being dismissed. Moreover, outside of party politics, the sheer number of young people who attend activities organised by these foundations warrants more curiosity about the effect they have on everyday lives of at least a part of the population.

Understanding these processes and their effects requires a double move

5. I borrow the term from Buden (2010).

away from orthodox understandings of intervention. First, instead of focussing on the local/international binary (and critiquing its implicit hierarchy), we need to inquire into the malleability of the local and the ways in which people are engaged by and actively engage different processes. And second, instead of grieving the absence of liberalism or condemning the depoliticisation resulting from particular governmentalities, we must broaden our view to first see, and then theorise, a much more varied set of effects. While initially concerned with party politics, these interventions echo far beyond the confines of institutional politics. As Alexander Vorbrugg (2015, 137) agues in the context of a German political foundation's activities in Ukraine, they "contest existing political realities and create new ones." This redefinition and contestation far transcends the fields of visibility inscribed in particular NFE activities, and I observed it in the workshops I attended and in interviews with people active in NFE in the past.

A New Way of Governing

Towards the end of the Erasmus+ week that I started the chapter with, the other participants and I were put into small groups to develop our own group projects. My exhaustion led me to ask four of my colleagues out loud: Is the goal here to learn to write a project that will get funded by Erasmus+, or are we here to actually think in a grassroots way about issues we want to work on, and to learn to solve them in a non-patronising way? Nikola, a very experienced Erasmus+ participant, seemed to have understood my exasperation and translated it into simple words: "Some of us here manage organisations. You have personal projects, but they [the trainers] *do* Erasmus+ and they expect the feedback to *be* Erasmus+."

The way to do Erasmus+ feedback is to emphasise any possible overlap with the programme's governmentalised parameters: short, smart, and reportable. Funding is secured through framing ideas in the terms of "project management" and Erasmus+ participation. Practically, this translates into life as "project-making": conceptualising action in phases and making goals manageable and achievable before anything else (Vetta 2019, 65). This way of thinking, prominent in civil society more generally, conditions "the way social problems are defined and addressed" (Vetta 2019, 67). We were not there to practise politics, but to become project management, or Erasmus+, professionals. This professionalisation implied a particular career path as well: becoming a part of civil society.

This has an effect on multiple levels. On an individual level, this project-

thinking prepares people to accept the short-term nature of their lives: precarious work, precarious government projects, and precarious welfare (Eliasoph 2011, xvii–xviii). A similar argument has been made in relation to the Education and Culture Directorate of the European Commission regarding ways in which it promotes projects that work "towards the formation of mobile, flexible, and self-governing European laborers" (K. Mitchell 2006, 391). But on a larger scale, this process also continues the NGOisation of civil society that started with internationally funded "civil society building" in the post-Yugoslav space.

Instead of fostering "the voluntary participation of citizens in public life," international funding "created a robust structure of professional(ized) organizations that interacted directly with the state and donors, often duplicating the liberal agendas of Western European and North American social movements of previous decades" (Baća 2022, 7). This is not surprising, since similar observations about the NGOisation of civil society in the Yugoslav space have been made since the early 2000s (Bagić 2004; Stubbs 2012; Sampson 2002; 2003; 2004; Vukov 2013). Governmentality approaches from the perspective of statebuilding and peacebuilding interventions proceed in a similar vein, describing civil society support as "particular kinds of democratic visions" that circumscribe and "tame" political action within permissible parameters (Kurki 2011; Tagma, Kalaycioglu, and Akcali 2013). The process is described well in Marek Mikuš's study of civil society building in Serbia: such interventions do not completely abolish political action, but "redirect it to actively promote the autonomisation of individuals and society, their constitution as self-governing subjects driven by market rationality" (2011, 13).

In the following section I build onto the now common critiques of NFE (and civil society more generally) as forms of governmentality and tools of depoliticisation, to show how they unfold, why they are attractive to local actors, and what is left when they are abandoned as incomplete.

"Networking": From NFE to Civil Society and the State

The professionalisation and networks that NFE works toward help to transform relations between the state, citizens, and civil society. The theoretical connection between democracy and civil society capacity building was concretised and expanded in my observations. Most providers of NFE are NGOs themselves, and the implicit goal of their activities is framed around participants remaining in the sector (*u sektoru*): becoming a part of civil soci-

ety themselves, through project writing, volunteering, or becoming NGO employees. NFE thus cannot be discussed without addressing civil society more generally, and, as we shall see below, this is closely connected to the idea of what the state is and does. While some of my observations support interpretations of civil society development and NFE as depoliticising NGOisation, I also saw dynamics that do not fit this image. From the perspective of people supposed to transform themselves under the influence and power of these policies, we observe a more subtle and far less complete reordering of political space through international intervention. This reordering connects NFE activities that contribute to the professionalisation of both young people and civil society, and the wider rearrangement of the relationship between the state and civil society.

The NGOisation of civil society was illustrated well by one interviewee, Danijela, an NGO worker in an organisation that was started during the anti-Milošević protests and that then grew to become the partner organisation of the EU's Technical Assistance for Civil Society Organisation.[6] I spoke to her because she was working on political education in her current position, and because she herself was an experienced participant in NFE activities. Unlike other NGO workers who would often lament the professionalisation of NGOs as taking them away from community work and trapping them in endless paperwork and donor politics, Danijela was clear about the division of labour: grassroots organisations do activism, while organisations like hers provide the technocratic expertise. Her organisation, however, provides it in the form of NFE activities designed specifically for NGOs: how to write a project, how to develop a strategy, how to fund-raise. Thus, even in her own narrative, the grassroots are helped by professionalising them, not by someone else doing the "professional part" for them.

Danijela also emphasised that people "in the sector" probably attend five or six of those "little schools" (*školice*) I was interested in before getting employment (interview, March 14, 2016). In other words, NFE activities create a specific class of actors who are crucial for the sustained project of building democracy in Serbia, which is also true for the wider Balkans. Others have noted the existence of these networks, but NFE plays a specific role in their formation. While this professionalisation obviously excludes those grassroots organisations that are unable or unwilling to engage in

6. The programme Technical Assistance to Civil Society Organisations in the Western Balkans and Turkey included a wide range of projects aimed at building civil society capacities that were to facilitate cooperation with the EU. The programme ended in 2017 and the Serbian website taken down, but a good review of activities can be found in a 2016 report on CSO needs in Serbia (TACSO 2016).

"project work" (see Vetta 2019, 65–67), the same process also creates a class of actors and a field of employment not limited to civil society. Many year-long courses emphasise that the networks participants make long outlive the courses in question. These networks extend from international projects and local NGOs to different government offices and private companies, thus blurring the boundaries between state institutions and civil society. This creates informal networks that were crucial in post-socialist transformations in East Europe (see Wedel 2009) and that shaped the translation of policies into post-war reforms in the Yugoslav space (Stubbs 2013; Clarke et al. 2015; Deacon and Stubbs 2007).

The boundaries between the state and civil society shifted significantly in the aftermath of the regime change. After the overthrow of Milošević it was civil society that became the government, and the clearest effect of the massive support for civil society during the 2000s was the entrance of civil society actors and social movement leaders into official politics. One of my interviewees—who has been working in a large NFE organisation since the mid-1990s—described the events of 2000 as "waking up one day and discovering that you personally know the entire cabinet" (interview, March 21, 2016). Similarly, when I asked experienced NGO workers about changes in their work, they always spoke about the difficulty of changing their relationship to the state. They went from working to bring down the government to becoming the government. Besides changing the orthodox understanding of civil society as separate from and a limit to the state, this also changed the motivations for attending NFE activities and working in civil society more generally. As an interviewee explained, people went from using NFE and NGOs to *confront* political power, to seeing them as an opportunity to *gain* political power through existing networks (interview, April 7, 2016).

While civil society grew closer to party politics, it still retained the specific allure of higher wages and an exciting work environment. In discussing this topic, an NGO employee summarised the feeling:

> I mean, it's a lot easier like this—I sit here, the AC is on, blinds down, we're having a nice chat . . . better than being out on the campaign trail at some market trying to convince some people and getting spat on, cursed, and insulted. And that's all . . . a part of politics. So there is definitely glamour here [in civil society]. The majority, a large part, of, let's say educated people [*obrazovanog sveta*] would like to exert some government [*bi volela da vrši neku vlast*], but would not like to fight for it, would prefer to be handed it on a platter. (Interview, April 7, 2016)

Even though it might be "nicer" to sit in an NGO office than be in party politics, NGO workers still became valuable assets for the state government. Once the "return to Europe" began, it was NGO workers who could write projects, deal with international organisations, and use English. Skills gained through NFE and used to bring down the government were suddenly needed to make government possible. Moreover, the conditions set by the EU focussed on cooperation between the state and civil society in the "negotiation" period prior to future membership in the EU. The focus on civil society in EU negotiations was implemented in Serbia after the Croatian negotiation process was accused of including civil society "too little and too late." The structure imagines civil society groups commenting on screening reports and action plans that make the body of the EU negotiation process—this is the "consultation process" between the Serbian government and civil society meant to promote local ownership of the process beyond the state. While I return more to these dynamics in a particular field in Chapter 5, it is important to note here that the blurring of the boundaries between state and civil society, brought about both by the changing administrative processes and by the emergence of a class of actors who moved between the two, results in the NGOisation of the state.

This overlap between the state and civil society is examined in Mikuš's (2015) study of the creation of the Serbian Civil Society Law in 2009, and the establishment of the Office for Cooperation with the Civil Society in 2011. In both events, personal ties played a more important role than a strict division between governmental and non-governmental titles, and Mikuš brings to fore these "informal networks and interstitial arenas of power" (Mikuš 2011, 13). This specific vision of governing utilises technical concepts (which were taught in NFE), like budget discipline, audit, efficiency, and competition. At the same time, it invites civil society to be both a partner in administrative rule and a competitor in the field of public services provision (Mikuš 2011, 13).

The performance of these networks is sometimes theatrically absurd. I attended a consultation meeting for CSOs and the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological development, organised by the Office for the Cooperation with Civil Society in April 2016. The NGO working group meeting for educational reform had about eighty civil society representatives and several government officials. Civil society representatives were demanding change, and the officials claimed that they were doing everything that was possible. Early in the morning, a representative of one of the biggest NGOs in Serbia raised her hand in the Q&A. She did not, however, start with a question; rather she started by congratulating the ruling party, which I assume was represented by the ministry officials, for being re-elected earlier

that week. There was an audible gasp in the room: independent media and civil society have been warning about the growing authoritarian tendencies of the current government for a while, and both the election campaign and the actual election were mired in irregularities. Seeing my surprised face, a young professional whom I already knew leaned over: "No surprise there. Everyone knows they get most of the Line 481." This budget line relates to all state and municipal NGO funding and is officially called "donations for non-governmental organisations." However, the budget line also finances youth and sport organisations, religious associations, and political parties, thus adding to the funding confusion of the third sector in Serbia.

The networks that NFE facilitators worked to create and the career aspirations of the young people I met not only shape individual life experiences but also transform the state and civil society. Studying the experiences of NFE participants that go on to work in civil society points to the very political changes that the supposedly apolitical building of NFE and civil society brought to Serbia. NFE thus becomes a conduit between international and domestic ideas that are translated into a very specific vision of the relationship between the state and civil society, and engagement with the experiences of the targets of intervention brings this translation to the fore.

Depoliticisation as Purification, Purification as Geopolitical Positioning

There are multiple dimensions to this reordering of political life: a specific form of participation for both individuals and communal action, a market rationality in which funding becomes the legitimising tool for political ideas, an overreliance on transparency, meritocracy and expertise as supposedly apolitical ideals, and the proceduralism that dominates public discourse.[7] The power of these ideals is illustrated by their ubiquity, as they were present in educational activities with themes ranging from transitional justice to party development. Importantly, they were not only top-down ideas presented by international donors and their local partners but were often voiced as strong desires of NFE participants themselves. My interlocutors saw these global neoliberal ideas as solutions to the corruption and nepotism they observed. Recasting these aims away from seeing them as (just) powerful international discourses, to recognising them as objects of local desire, challenges the conception of local actors and identities, and the aims and acts of intervention.

7. I borrow the idea of the purification of politics through procedures from Greenberg (2014, 151), while geopolitical positioning comes from Jansen (2009).

Critiques of participation as a form of neoliberal governmentality "elide what is compelling to local actors about becoming self-managing, self-regulating subjects" (Greenberg 2014, 87). A similar issue is raised around anti-politics in the region as a coping mechanism that allows people to distance themselves from the crimes committed in the name of the state during the wars (see Kušić 2021). Depoliticisation cannot be understood without seeing it as a road to purification, a way of dealing with the immaturity of political children created by the discourses of transition. As we shall see, the imaginaries of purification are also thoroughly geopolitical, with political maturity lying firmly in "the West." The proposed solutions are compelling for a reason: structural critiques are associated with backward socialist thinking, demands for labour rights are interpreted as stubborn remnants of socialist entitlement, and entire projects are made sensible through an implicit understanding that there is really something missing in Balkan subjects. Proceduralism and economism are then not free-floating discourses of global liberalism but are supposed to serve as the "purification" of (post-) socialist corruptions.

When external interventions and the values they promote are seen as desirable cures for the backwardness of Balkan subjects, their power exponentially grows. While there might be many doubts about how accepted or not the EU integration process is in the eyes of the Serbian public, it is difficult to imagine a plausible political alternative to the EU or political action outside of its predefined parameters. This is more than a catchphrase. The 2008 election campaign, for example, revolved around two groups who claimed that Europe in fact, does, or does not, "have an alternative" (see Mikuš 2018, 82–83). This powerful pairing of progressive politics with "Europeanisation" shapes the wider political context. It further professionalises NGOs (directly through the Technical Assistance for Civil Society Organisation and indirectly through funding), thus detaching NGOs from their constituencies and excluding alternative dialogues that may better fit local contexts—as often happens with LGBT issues and politics (see Bilić 2016).

Understanding these positionings is impossible within the local-international binary. Instead, we encounter what Stef Jansen (2009, 824) refers to as "everyday geopolitical discourse": "a routine, non-official mode of representation of one's collective place in the contemporary world" that helps us see how the "geopolitical becomes personal." Purification here becomes geopolitical, against the region's own perceived "Balkan-ness" and away from others further East and South. Here the local becomes a pathology.

I observed everyday geopolitical positioning when young people I spoke

to found problems to be internal, and help to arrive externally. Critics of government imagined alternatives that always relied on the "ways things are done out there," "European values," and visions of "how they do it in normal countries." Peace, development, and progress are presented as developing and arriving from the outside. In her research on Mozambique, Sabaratnam (2017, 80, 142–44) identifies *protagonismo* as a specific dynamic of intervention that sees donors as always inserting themselves into policy narratives to reaffirm Western agency. In my experience, however, it is not just the interveners who want to insert themselves, but also the recipients of aid, officials, and the public, who expect projects to be legitimised and materially supported externally.

Horizontal civilisational hierarchies are used to position Serbia as simultaneously inferior to Europe and superior to countries positioned geographically further East/South.[8] The inferior position in relation to Europe was present in explanations of problems, offered by both trainers and participants, that often fixated on local pathologies, such as failed state policies that produced failed citizens. Take, for example, a seminar on the EU integration process that was a part of a long-standing "advanced undergraduate course" (funded by various corporate and political foundations throughout its existence) that I occasionally attended. The guest speaker held a high position in the EU accession negotiating team, and he started the lecture by talking about the long process of EU integration in Serbia, at that point counting seventeen years. He quickly added that one never really starts from zero: Serbia started from "minus five years" after the regime change in 2000. During the lecture, this number grew to Serbia being ten and then fifteen years behind the rest of the region in its "return to Europe" (fieldwork journal, March 13, 2016).

This temporal othering did not happen in an anthropological text by an enthusiastic ethnologist discovering the Balkans. It was performed by a progressive, educated, cosmopolitan member or the Serbian elite, for a class of aspiring students in their early twenties. In many classrooms I visited, Balkanist allochronism was not just a "foreign" imposition but constantly re-enacted. If we spoke about unemployment, we talked about the outdated education system and the unreasonable expectations of the labour market that young people inherited from socialism (although they were mostly born after its end). Both state structures and the people in the country were seen as backward when compared to European ideals, and purification was a way out.

8. I take the terms "horizontal" and "vertical hierarchies" from Obad (2016).

At the same time it denigrated the country and the people in it, this horizontal axis was used to differentiate Serbia from those "more backward." This happened, for example, when comparing Serbia to African countries and using their similarities to demonstrate Serbian backwardness. In a seminar explaining the dire state of the Serbian economy, the lecturer attempted to show the students the connections between economic progress and the rule of law. To illustrate the gravity of the situation in Serbia, he reached for a comparison: "You can't expect economic progress when you have the rule of law on the level of Senegal." Students laughed in response—the comparison is unthinkable. But the trainer silenced the giggles: "These are international comparisons" (fieldwork journal, 1 February 2016)!

Similar comparisons have been noted in passing by other researchers. Theodora Vetta (2019, 56), for example, interviewed an NGO worker who described the hardship of the early 1990s: "I remember an example from eastern Serbia, there were people paid to help other people to be pushed into the bus!!! You know, like in India, like in Bangladesh. Really, from being in the first world we fell [to] the third in a matter of years."

These comparisons are effective because a racial and civilisational logic makes the parallel unacceptable: Serbia should not be like the Global South. The same logic underlines the absence of other spaces that went through conflict and economic "transitions" from our discussions. While some experienced civil society employees would criticise decontextualised foreign expertise by saying the experts arrived "thinking that this is Mozambique," there was no space to discuss potential similarities or solidarities to, for example, Mozambique as a space with a history of recent conflict. Recognising possible shared material realities was precluded by claims to Europeanness and its constitutive exclusions.

Exploring everyday geopolitical positioning moves us beyond noting the Orientalising and self-Orientalising discourses, to see local subjects enmeshed in global politics, not only empirically, as we connect them to trans-scalar structures, but also in their own understandings of themselves as subjects. Thus, working towards reconstructing different types of subjects in intervention literature, and IR more broadly, requires making space not only for local particularities, but also for the ways in which they connect to global politics.

• • •

What does it mean to see beyond the actors, acts, and aims of intervention in this chapter? In part, it means realising that there is no one "local" and its image that inspires interventionism. On the contrary, these images are mal-

leable, responsive to both local and global developments, and used for shifting rationales of government. Instead of "youth" as one image that intervention targets, this chapter brought in three distinct subjects of government. Youth was a specific political subjectivity in Yugoslavia, which helps us to contextualise the images we encounter today and restores some of the historical presence usually lost in accounts of intervention. Even within narratives of post-war international intervention, two remarkably opposite images of youth are present: one as capable subjects who had the will and the skill to take down a dictator but needed help in the form of resources, and the other as immature political children who needed to be taught how to do politics.

Looking beyond actors, acts, and aims of intervention also opens the door to examining interventions' wider effects. This involves moving beyond critiquing NFE, or civil society and NGOisation that NFE is a part of, as "just" depoliticisation. Instead, this chapter started from experiences of networking and professionalisation to inquire into the minute processes through which depoliticisation unfolds. It addressed the macro—and very political—changes of the state-citizen-civil society relations it entails, the historical presence on which it builds, and the micro and affective dynamics that make such depoliticised positions attractive to young people.

The practices that push young people to think in terms of individualised action and away from debates over structural problems—whether national or international—reflect the ideals of global neoliberalism, but they are not ahistorical or groundless. They are rooted in the enduring image of culturally, politically, and economically deficient Balkan subjects, a discourse that was fertile ground for the image of political children dominant after 2000. Since the early days of Yugoslavia, NFE has been used to create "citizens." However, while citizenship in Yugoslavia was structured by the image of "brotherhood and unity," today it revolves around self-enterprise, competition, and the desire to escape the "Balkan position." A straightforward critique of depoliticisation would preclude the exploration of the far wider effects that come into view when seeing it as an always incomplete blueprint.

Out of thirty participants in the Erasmus+ event from the beginning of the chapter, I was one of only two who had never attended a similar event. Most participants had already gone through other projects that explained the permissible parameters. Yet they constantly pushed against those parameters, in official sessions and coffee breaks, dinners, and outings. At the end of the same event, we were encouraged to use the term "youth with fewer opportunities" when working with marginalised groups. By avoiding any allusion to class, race, gender, sexuality, or ethnicity, the term would allow us to help "those in need" without questioning the systemic issues that created

those needs. A young man from Greece wondered out loud: "We all agree that we use this term only in writing projects with the EU, but aren't we all today youth with fewer opportunities? Fewer than our parents, fewer than our peers in Western Europe, and fewer than we had when we were born" (fieldwork journal, January 26, 2016).

The temporal dimension of this claim is complicated in post-Yugoslav spaces: people attending these workshops were born in the late 1980s and the 1990s, and thus their chances for happiness are still higher today than during the war years in which they were born. But his comments, and the many other heated discussions we had outside of the official programme, point to the benefits of an ethnographic sensibility that made me sit with the young people I met through sometimes exciting and sometimes tedious lectures and meals. It allowed me insight into "surplus" time: the added value of "residential" projects that allow questions and interests to form. Getting to know each other inevitably led to curiosity and what Eliasoph (2011, xii) termed "possibly fruitful perplexity." During our week together, we discussed gender, class, sexuality, race, and precarity outside official sessions—conversations that allowed me to see my fellow participants outside of the parameters of intervention and that brought to the fore the incompleteness and attractiveness of what we consider international power.

Probing those perplexities was a powerful and analytically productive reminder that, despite their anti-political rationalities, programmes that focus on participation, empowerment, and activation are never complete. The young people I encountered, many times over targeted by the neoliberal practices of NFE, are neither passive products of global neoliberalism nor authentic locals separated from global flows. They are political subjects, aware of their positionality within their communities, the state, Europe, and the world. The next chapter follows their lifeworlds as they both use and contest the practices of intervention.

CHAPTER 4

Beyond Intervention

Non-formal Education, Unemployment, and Resistance

At the end of the last session of a political school organised in cooperation between a small leftist party and a UK political foundation, a participant who had to leave early said goodbye to his colleagues by "wishing [them] the best of luck with the election and speedy employment" (fieldwork journal, March 18, 2016). The reference to the election was understandable: the course was funded by a political foundation, and even though the party that ran it was marginal, I assumed that everyone there had ambitions in the upcoming elections. The employment reference, however, struck me—what does political education have to do with (un)employment?

His comment resonated with discussions that happened during the breaks of the workshops I attended. These revolved around applications, CVs, job openings in specific NGOs, surprisingly exploitative labour practices of those NGOs, hopes, expectations of reward, and disappointments when those rewards did not materialise. These observations did not fit into my expectations of what NFE is about in Serbia. In most of my fieldwork, I was faced with stories of revolutionary Otpor! guerrillas and the political children whose political culture was troubled but improvable. The short reference to speedy employment, however, pointed to a topic that was often discussed in and around NFE events, but that I had failed to consider analytically generative. How do stories and realities of navigating unemployment change what we know about NFE as an intervention?

Around the same time, a debate on educational reform entered public discourse, with heated arguments around the so-called dual education. Also referred to as "vocational" education, it puts emphasis on secondary school students working in private companies during their education. Not only was the debate related directly to unemployment, but there was also significant

international presence in it: the reform programme was supported by international agencies and resisted by some of the same groups I met in NFE events.

This resistance combined with other ways in which young people contested the narratives they were presented with in NFE: some used arguments of the "common good" to deflect neoliberal thinking, while others provided conceptually sophisticated critiques of the apolitical status of civil society of Serbia. In short, as I followed the experiences of young people whom I met in NFE schools and seminars, I was led beyond particular NFE activities as individual acts of intervention to the field of unemployment and the many practices of resistance that supposedly apolitical initiatives foster.

This expanded field of visibility points to the movement of labour, capital, and ideas of human value that shape the youth labour market and the experiences of my interlocutors. Scholars have highlighted how everyday political economies are formed under international presence (Distler, Stavrevska, and Vogel 2019) and how post-conflict transformations in the Yugoslav region result in increasing precariousness (Baker 2010; 2014; Musić 2013; Pugh 2018). This chapter similarly expands the view from the actions of interveners—who invest in NFE activities—to manifold international flows of capital and labour that come together to shape what young people dream of and where they find employment. Contrary to research that analyses and critiques NFE as a process of governmentalisation used to shape populations to a particular ideal, this expanded field of visibility uncovers a quiet coexistence of radically *different* ways of preparing young people for the labour market: one that nurtures an entrepreneurial spirit and self-employment, and another one that creates a narrow-skilled workforce ready to be harnessed by the private sector (within the country or abroad).

The previous chapter discussed many of my observation that point to the depoliticising effect of NFE. As you recall from a quote in the previous chapter, while NFE once attracted "little revolutionaries," today it is made up of "individuals fighting for themselves." In my fieldwork, these two were often in stark contrast. The seven-week seminar on transitional justice, for example, was designed around cases from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in which we discussed details of war crimes and atrocities. Some of the emotional burden of these discussions was removed by the legalist frameworks used, and I suspect, by the participants' experience in discussing this topic, which shaped much of civil society in Serbia (see David 2020). War crimes cases were political and politicised. However, I often found them difficult: I was not used to the field and the legalist framework did not remove the shock of graphic detail.

After a gruelling session detailing a massacre, I joined a couple of par-

ticipants over coffee (fieldwork journal, March 31, 2016). As soon as we exited the door, they started updating each other on the status of ongoing job applications directed at civil society organisations that we met in one seminar or another. A common friend, they said, was recently fired for misspelling a speaker's name and failing to provide water during a public event. Another one got a job that many people, including my colleagues, had applied for, and a new call had opened, but it required more experience than my colleagues had—they were debating whether the effort of applying was worth it. The juxtaposition of the political nature of war crimes prosecution with seemingly apolitical job applications points to more than the affective dissonance I personally experienced. It brings into view coeval lives outside of NFE classrooms, where the reasons for coming into the classrooms in the first place were formed: the need for skills and networks.

This chapter follows these observations beyond intervention. It is divided into two main sections: the first deals with unemployment and ways in which it provides more insight into the dynamics of governmentalisation. I bring out three aspects of intervention dynamics visible in this expanded view: images of subjects, the networks they move through, and heterogenous forms of power that engage them. Familiar images of "backwardness" are used to explain unemployment, not only by "international" actors, but also by young people I spoke to in workshops and in seminars. The networks that we saw reshaping state-citizen-civil society relations in the previous chapter are complicated by the material reality of unemployment that propels young people into them. Finally, by making sense of absences—people missing from NFE—I also move to a different understanding of liberalism as the aim of intervention and recast it as always heterogenous and contradictory.

The second part of the chapter presents different forms of contestation I observed. It examines two broad narratives that serve as foundations for contesting intervention logics: the narratives of nation and class, and a broadly "left" politics. In exploring these new dimensions of my interlocutors' experiences, I demonstrate how following the lives of the targets of intervention inevitably pushes against and beyond the parameters of intervention: it creates an image of the local that does not easily fit the local-international binary, expands our view into fields of visibility to show how intervention moves through many different acts, and provides a different account of liberalism.

Non-formal Youth Education and Unemployment

> We have an "inflation of diplomas" . . . like everyone needs a diploma. And then lots of people who already have the opportunities

> [*mogućnosti*], who have been to university, now they all go to youth work *eventi*[1]. And this made youth work *eventi* and trainings become ways for these people to get more diplomas. And now you have a new branch of recognition, and this is recognition of knowledge obtained at a seminar. . . . This never used to be a part of the discussion. The discussion used to be to recognise youth work as a system that supports people to participate, become part of society, include the excluded. . . . The focus was always on the ones who are in the biggest shit, and this has now changed. Now it's like, "Recognise my diploma so I can get a job"—an interesting new moment. . . . Youth in Action became an employment service—unfortunately, employment service meaning that we . . . train youth to be super employable. And Youth in Action began as building solidarity, intercultural understanding. . . . All those values [*sve ono vrednosno*], and it ended up as "Let's build super-employable young people since they are complaining that they cannot find jobs."
>
> —Interview with an Erasmus+ trainer, Belgrade, February 21, 2016

The trainer's comments on the development of the Youth in Action / Erasmus+ programme fit within the global post-2008 financial crisis focus on *youth* unemployment (Sukarieh and Tannock 2015, 56–57). There are many issues with measuring youth unemployment in Serbia. The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2017) measures age groups 15–24 (unemployment rate 34.9 percent) and 24–60 (15.9 percent), but youth is defined as those aged 15–30. A special report produced in cooperation with the ILO focussed on the 15–29 age group and found the unemployment rate to be 30.8 percent, with youth neither in employment nor in education or training comprising 24 percent (Marjanović 2016). With the national youth unemployment rate moving between close to 50 percent in 2013 and estimated at 30 percent in 2016, it is obvious that young people in Serbia not only failed in the democratic transition, but also foundered in the economic one. However, I did not find "unemployment" by attending "employability" events—I was primarily interested in ideas of political action and thus attended events that focussed on political and social topics. Yet unemployment haunted every event I attended: not in programmes and project documents, but in experiences of young people attending these events.

Soon after my entry into the field, I started to hear about the *expectations* associated with these workshops, which included internships and employment. At the same time, I also listened to many bitter stories of disappointment: positions that went to other people, exploitative practices of NGOs

1. Combination of the English word events, but with a BCSM plural suffix i.

(which even went beyond the huge amount of unpaid labour provided through internships), and contracts that ended for small mistakes (like misspelling a speaker's name in a public event). After about three months of fieldwork, I found myself talking and thinking mostly about (un)employment.

Let me start with an excerpt from an interview with a young employed person. Marina was the project manager for the semester-long course I attended in Belgrade. She herself was a graduate of a different course in the same organisation, and this was her first paid employment in civil society. I wanted to make sense of the motivation and determination that I observed in the students I met:

KK: I look at all these young people—they work, they study, they attend so many non-formal education programmes. Where does the motivation come from?

M: From the first piece of information when choosing a university somewhere, I don't think it's very different in Croatia or anywhere else. . . . The most important challenge in growing up is that you have to equip yourself [*osposobiti se*] for the labour market, which is quite closed. . . . I mean, it is simply not enough that you just get a university degree and that you are academically . . . on any level, even on the highest level. . . . It's not enough. In this way, you have to master skills and knowledge in most areas, the most that you can, so that you can expect that you can potentially be [employed]. . . . This is what [senior employee of the organisation] best describes as literally the return of the times of the precariat. We are all afraid of jobs . . . if everything will be okay, if we will have a salary, if everything will be okay tomorrow. . . . Will it be this way or that way . . . ? All these are . . . the labour market conditions [*uslovi te*]. But the good side of this is that really everyone is then all over the place. And I really think that a young person . . . it's only an excuse to say, "I am studying at a university." I'm telling you: I studied and finished in time [*u roku*].[2] By then I already had two jobs when I was finishing, and I think this can be accomplished. . . . It's just . . . just good organisation, good plan, and serious motivation. And the motivation first comes from the outside, I think in our growing up, and then it somehow quickly moves to the inside when you are already finishing your degree and you really start to really want this. . . . And somehow these two connect.

2. This qualification speaks to the problem of the excessive time needed to obtain a higher education degree in the region. For many, and especially before the Bologna process, a four-year degree can take up to eight years to finish. The average time to finish a four-year degree before the Bologna process was officially 7.28 years (V. Jovanović et al. 2016, 54).

There are three dimensions of Marina's comment that I want to highlight. First, she sees NFE—both the programmes she attended and the one she was now providing—as forms of self-entrepreneurialism: a way of preparing oneself for the unavoidable cruelty of the labour market. Second, besides providing skills that might help in employment, Marina's career trajectory also shows that NFE serves as an entry point to the professionalised networks. As discussed in the previous chapter, these networks move through both local and international civil society, the state, and the private sector. Third, Marina also offers a particular explanation of inequality: she uses her own commitment as proof that precarity can be ameliorated by improving oneself. In the rest of this section, I follow these three threads to better understand young people in NFE as political subjects and the effects of NFE as intervention.

My observations on unemployment are complemented by quotations from the NPZM, the unpublished National Programme for the Employment of Youth I was led to while researching the Roof Youth Organisation of Serbia (Krovna organizacija mladih Srbije). The significance and genesis of the document were presented to me by Marko, the person who coordinated its creation. Marko started the interview by rehearsing the critique of donor-driven agendas and saying that everyone is "into employment" these days: "Even organisations that did sexual education are now employment experts!" (interview, April 26, 2016). In contrast, he was very proud of the National Programme as a product of *real* expertise: it was even presented to the prime minister, and Marko was sure it would be adopted once the election was over. To illustrate the importance of the document, he listed names of ministers, governmental officers, and domestic, EU, and UN strategies that were involved and consulted in creating the programme. He was proud of the names and acronyms. They showed that, unlike people associated with "those other organisations," he actually *was* an expert on employment. The more "procedures" he listed, the fairer and less biased I was supposed to perceive the document; and the safer he and others involved in making it were from accusations of corruption.

The document (NPZM) he sent me a few days after our meeting was telling—not because it was put into effect, but because it was produced by "youth" for the Serbian government. Even though NPZM was publicly presented by the minister of sport and education in early 2016 (Ministry of Youth and Sport 2016), to my knowledge it was not acted upon. A later report on youth employment policy does not mention it at all (Bijelović Bosanac, Pavlović, and Martinić 2017). The document was created in cooperation with the Ministry of Youth and Sport, the Roof Youth Organisation

of Serbia, and the National Association of the Practitioners of Youth Work. The creation of NPZM began in February 2015 with a consultation of the largest employers in Serbia, thirty-six foreign and domestic companies, on issues relating to youth employment. The document is supposed to provide clear guidelines on how to improve the dreadful situation in youth employment in Serbia. To quote the document itself, its goal is "to contribute to changes in the value systems [*sistemi vrednosti*], to help increase the quality of the labour force, and to help youth employment in Serbia" (NPZM, 3).

I treat this document as an artefact: an expression of subjects formed in the interstices of domestic policies and transnational institutions and the norms that engage them. In the following, I read it besides fieldwork encounters and observations to show how the politics of improvement operate within unemployment, and how NFE is a part of it. The document was produced by young people who have become experts in EU-speak, in applying for grants, in delineating goals, outcomes, and measures, and who, by learning to reproduce the language of this world of projects, also learned to reproduce its specific views and diagnoses. To emphasise the document's international dimension, Marko highlighted that the deficiencies of youth listed in NPZM, and the document itself, have been identified and created in relation to international documents like Europe 2020 and the Council of Europe's strategies and recommendations. Moreover, the Roof Youth Organisation of Serbia's funding comes from a combination of foreign donors and domestic government funding. NPZM points to the translation—and the possibility of outright adoption—of international liberal narratives. Importantly, it helps us understand liberalism better: it points to different visions of governing unemployment that engage young people with dramatically different forms of power.

Self-Improvement

Marina's story, which opened this section, is one of self-entrepreneurialism: NFE comes out as a strategy of improving oneself through the ethos of entrepreneurship. People I met treat NFE events as CV embellishments, and "collect diplomas" both to kill time while unemployed and as a form of entrepreneurial betterment of self—a sentiment also captured in the trainer's comments quoted at the start of the chapter. It was not unusual for the more professionalised people I interviewed to offer me their CVs and even NFE certificates, to "prepare for the interview." While this points to entrepreneur-

ship understood in terms of governmentality—relating to man-enterprise not only in an economic, but also in an anthropological sense (Dardot and Laval 2013, 116), it also has a particular material context that both pushes and pulls young people towards NFE and civil society networks. They are pulled by the real benefits of NFE: learning to navigate bureaucracies with entrepreneurial confidence, becoming fluent in project talk, gaining experience in working in English, and meeting people whom they will be able to turn to for both connections and skills that they might be missing. At the same time, they are pushed by the need to "equip themselves" for the market, by the feeling of always being "not enough," and by taking precarious existence as a given that can be ameliorated by improving oneself and becoming better at navigating the precariat. As Marina told me, motivation comes from the outside—the labour market, the people encouraging you, the opportunities presented, and the threats perceived. Motivation then "moves inside" to become a part of the subjectivation of a successful *homo economicus* in neoliberal times.

NPZM similarly focusses on developing skills and competencies but adds to them a dimension that also hides behind Marina's narrative: that there must be a personal and emotional proclivity towards wanting those skills in the first place. Self-improvement refers not only to *skills*, but also to the *will* needed to attain them. The document identifies four specific objects of improvement: (1) youth value systems and information about the needs of the labour market, (2) youth competencies (improved through trainings and non-formal education), (3) professional practical experiences and the "dual education" system, and (4) an atmosphere suitable for developing youth entrepreneurship (NPZM, 8–9). The "changes in value system" that are mentioned in the document are never specified. However, we do get a glimpse into some of them in the section that describes the inputs of consulted companies:

> Companies pointed out that major problems are found in the lack of preparation of youth to work in specific sectors, i.e., lack of practical experience, high expenses of employing youth, lack of specific professional profiles on the labour market (e.g., crafts or IT profiles—data mining, business intelligence), insufficient mastery of business skills, an *inadequate value system*, which brings with it in many senses *unrealistic expectations of youth when it comes to employment, income levels, and work ethics*.
>
> (NPZM, 8, emphasis added)

"Changing values" and adjusting "unrealistic expectations" are listed as key outcome number one, but these values remain unspecified beyond "positive attitudes towards employment and work." This understanding is not limited to the policy paper. In discussions of unemployment that I witnessed in workshops and events, its causes were found either in the subjects' unwillingness to work and dedicate themselves, or in the educational system that failed to provide them with the needed skills and attitudes. In the document, we see their lack in multiple areas: lack of the "right attitude" (most likely meaning lack of commitment to hard work), lack of skills (supposed to be acquired through volunteering, dual education, and NFE), and a general lack of entrepreneurial spirit.

Even though this narrative is part of a more global approach to unemployment that "demonises" and "scapegoats" youth (Sukarieh and Tannock 2015, 30), in the Balkans it could not be accepted as a reality without an understanding of young people as deficient, post-socialist subjects. The paradox that people who were born during socialism are not "young" anymore does not prevent the whole of society from being diagnosed as suffering from a socialist hangover. The NPZM is underlined by popular images that explain economic failure: first through state failure, as the state is seen as oppressive and guilty of creating an "unsuitable atmosphere" for entrepreneurship; and second, through the failures of particular subjectivities that lack entrepreneurship (as they decline to move to another region or accept a low wage), their general "inactivity," or the absence of creativity and thinking "outside of the box."

While I am not equipped to judge the validity of these claims, there is a conspicuous absence of discussion of unemployment in relation to the mass de-industrialisation that followed a corrupt privatisation process (see Musić 2013, 29–32). Instead, images of subjects variously deformed by their socialist heritage are used to diagnose problems and design policies for solving them. Specific images of young people then become a part of the wider political economy that dictates the demands of the labour market. In Southeast Europe, the labour market is increasingly seen as a provider of cheap labour—an issue I return to at the end of the section.

Networks of (Un)employment

NPZM identifies four key stakeholders: foreign investors, the ministries in charge of each particular outcome, civil society, and the private sector. The

document does not explain its reliance on two corporate representatives, one in the form of a foreign investor and another in the form of the private sector, but I see them as echoing two different paradigms: one of economic progress through foreign direct investment (FDI), which is so dominant in Serbia, and the public-private partnership that is so popular in a world where politics are increasingly conducted through "projects." While such a wide coalition for tackling youth unemployment is not surprising, I want to point out the different types of networks that I observed. More than providing skills, NFE also offers an entry point into employment networks otherwise out of reach. This was retold to me with reference to both positive and negative outcomes. While Marina, in the interview above, presented her NFE experiences and the volunteering that came out of it as a way into formal employment, others told me stories of being bypassed after years of volunteering and attending and facilitating courses. The previous chapter discussed how these networks contribute to larger political reordering of citizen-state-civil society relations. Since the late 1990s, the civil society sector became a particular site of employment—at the same time promoting a culture of entrepreneurialism and the precarious labour relations within it (Baker 2014; Mikuš 2018; Vetta 2019). Here, however, I want to point out the individualised materiality of those networks.

When attending a small civil society conference in Belgrade, I recognised a participant I had met at a residential course a few months prior. Another conference attendee, a successfully employed member of staff in a large NGO, descried him as a "real [NFE] student [*pravi školarac*]": he attended many seminars, completed an internship with a famous civil society organisation, and was interning at the EU delegation office in Belgrade (fieldwork journal, February 11, 2016). Becoming a *pravi školarac* here implies becoming a part of a specific network of power (and labour) that straddles civil society, the state, and international institutions.

Based on this criterion, however, most people I met in NFE never managed to become *pravi školarci*. While some dreamt of civil society employment, they all struggled to find secure employment or ways to continue education. Centring their lived experiences through coeval engagement thus goes beyond civil society offices and projects concerned with peace and democracy. It brings into view the politics of improving the employability of young people in Serbia and requires shifting analytical focus beyond the conceptual parameters of intervention.

My interlocutors" complaints were direct: they expected "some type of employment" and felt wronged when it was withheld. Moreover, NFE trainers

(including those with Erasmus+) often lack certification, making it possible for "anyone" to be employed as a trainer and get access to wages several times higher than the averages for the countries in the region. More than facilitating the emergence of closed networks, this also leads to questioning the motives of employment in civil society. As explained by an Erasmus+ trainer:

> It's more it being the moment that they understand . . . however strange that word may be, which is used by the European Union—opportunity—you have financial opportunity. . . . Then people get little dollar signs in their eyes [*dolarčići*]. . . . Like, here, there's money that we should take. And regretfully, there are more and more trainers who are there because they know this is a job that can be well paid. (Interview with Erasmus+ trainer, February 18, 2016)

These expectations of monetary reward can be interpreted both as "strategic use" of NFE that somehow stays outside of the reach of power, and as "buying into" these narratives. As Martin Müller (2011, 8) shows in his study of education in Russia, some young people see competition for the game that it is and learn to "play it" without necessarily identifying with its underlying ideological assumptions. Similarly, many people I met were aware of "the game" they were presented with. They "played" not because they believed in the promises of meritocracy, which they could observe as false firsthand, but because they considered it the route with the highest chances of leading to employment.

Clearly distinguishing when one starts to internalise the rules that one is obeying misses the more far-reaching consequences of "the game." Even when NFE participants act out of worrying about (un)employment and not necessarily because they buy into the narratives of liberal interventionism, these young people are active agents in the reordering of political life away from state responsibility. Depoliticisation is then a lot less spectacular than an imperial plot: it is the product of real people trying to take care of their very real needs. Understanding interventions and how they are experienced necessitates inquiring into the material and affective worlds of unemployment. In the next section, I discuss a particular bifurcation of this field.

Different Subjects of Government

NGO employees and NFE trainers often discussed the problematic fact that NFE events are mostly "preaching to the choir." The largest NFE provider in

Belgrade, for example, estimates its reach to only 5–6 percent of youth in the country. Young people who were already more likely to engage in new activities and work on bettering themselves were attending activities that were supposed to encourage them to do exactly that. The people I met were not trapped in the "futurelessness" of Serbia (Anđić 2020b; see also D. N. Johnson 2019), but optimistic about the rewards they expected from their work. The need to explain the absence of most Serbian youth—both from the events themselves and from the employment circuits they were intertwined with—lurked in the background of my research: What separates this "choir" from the rest?

Marina's words above offer a particular answer: she presents individualist meritocracy as a view that celebrates having "good organisation" and "serious motivation," while at the same time providing a critique of the "excuses" that others might make. This points to a more general understanding of the difference between NFE-goers, as modern citizens, and their peers who were not a part of the choir to which the NGO sector was preaching: these young minds were opened through a combination of will, self-sacrifice, and skill. Here, the accusation of "passivity" and "apathy" not only referred to political action (as discussed in the literature), but also to actively taking personal responsibility for employment. With youth unemployment widely discussed as a burning problem, the people I spoke to, like Marina, relied on representation of subjects to explain the difference between them and the youth not on the same trajectory.

These representations rely on images of "backwardness." Those understanding the demands of the present are free to pursue success, while others remain trapped in the past. Progress, from lacking motivation to success stories like that of Marina, is imagined along teleological and often explicitly temporal lines: with time, everyone will learn how to live and succeed in the modern labour market. These explanations are interwoven with global hierarchies: those perceived to be European, modern, and civilised could be trusted to "make sacrifices" and make choices of "modern" subjects, while others were left behind.

Within youth policy captured in the NPZM, we see a similar separation and a quiet coexistence of radically different ways of developing youth for the labour market. The issues of practical experience and "dual education" imply a very different approach than that of creating an "atmosphere suitable for developing youth entrepreneurship." The latter entails an individual approach and topical breadth to nurture creativity. The former relies on creating a narrow skillset made available to the needs of capital. Once the field expands to consider experiences of (un)employment, different logics of improving employability of young people come into view.

It is within these different logics that the politics of improvement lie. The young people I spoke to were prepared for entrepreneurship and civil society, with politics increasingly unavailable to anyone not following the ruling party line. Many were exploring options for postgraduate education—my own experiences of applications, internships, and scholarships started numerous conversations. But there are also other, substantially different, projects targeting distinctive groups. I want to briefly mention two: migration and vocational or "dual" education. Even though the young people attending NFE activities were not directly involved in these programmes, and I therefore did not observe them firsthand, inquiring into the wider politics of improving youth (un)employment brought to the fore these experiences, which otherwise remain obscured.

Training for migration as one of the "alternative ways" of practising market rationality was brought to my attention by Jelena, a professional NFE-goer I got to know. Jelena was explicitly "political": she grew up protesting against Milošević and saw her future in one of the human rights NGOs in Belgrade. When I met her, she was finishing her second MA and looking for a job. The gloomy employment prospects made her look outside of the desired NGO circle. She was considering starting her own publishing house through a state project for helping young entrepreneurs. The selection was based on preparing a business plan, but most of the candidates, Jelena included, considered the business plan a "form" to be filled out, rather than an explosion of creative juices as imagined in "start-up" narratives. At the same time, Jelena was trying to find a teaching position in one of the many schools in Belgrade. Telling me about it, she emphasised that I could not imagine how *many* schools there are in Belgrade. She only found out about them when she saw the job listing: "You enter a building, and *op*, there's a school!" (fieldwork journal, March 31, 2016). She mentioned a particular school located on the fourth floor of a building in downtown Belgrade: on one side there were four classrooms of a medical nursing school (years 1 to 4) and on the other side four classrooms for learning German (language level 1 to 4). The match is obvious: as soon as they obtain their qualifications, the students are ready to work in Germany.

In this school, Jelena observed a small illustration of a much larger phenomenon of economic migration from Serbia (and the region more generally). While I do not delve into this issue, it is important to note that there is a longer history to this migration (see Majstorović 2021). Today, it is particularly strong in the health and care sectors and forms a part of the now famous "demographic crisis" in Southeast Europe (see Judah 2019). The

main reasons for leaving are reported to relate to compensation and working conditions in Serbian (and regional) healthcare systems (Stevanov et al. 2021). This migration is often helped by development agencies and bilateral agreements. The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) programme for the recruitment of nurses from Serbia to Germany, for example, sees it as a triple win: a decrease in unemployment in countries of origin; development of origin countries through remittances; and a solution to a shortage of nurses in Germany (see GIZ 2019). These movements not only depend on a particular image of the "free" subject that can pursue employment without worrying about social ties left behind, but are also driven by symbolic geographies that see (employment in) the West as a way out of the futurelessness and corruption of Serbia (Anđić 2020b; Erdei 2010; D. N. Johnson 2019). To quote Tanja Anđić's work on high-school students' imaginings of the future, "The horizon of hope is transposed onto imagined lives abroad" (2020a, 5).

Another alternative was brought to my attention through a public debate around "dual" or "vocational" education that unfolded during my stay in Serbia. The conversation around the reform was led by the Serbian Chamber of Commerce and supported by several development agencies that provided technical support and funding. These included the GIZ, the Swiss Development Agency, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (see Euler 2015; Rosca 2020). Vocational education, we are told, benefits students by providing an opportunity to earn money (by spending a part of their school week at work) and gain skills. This not only makes them generally more employable but provides a chance for continued employment in the same company (Čadež 2019). While technical reports on implementation abound, scholarly engagement with the topic is more limited. Nevertheless, researchers have identified dual education as a central component of neoliberalisation of education and society in Serbia (Reljanović 2019; Janković 2023; Đunda 2017). In short, while supposedly providing skills for navigating the labour market, dual education is also "legalised labour exploitation of children" (Janković 2023, 69). It benefits the employers by providing labour below minimum wage, and endangers educational opportunities of students who are encouraged to spend more time in manual labour.

In the public discourse in Serbia dual education became a symbol of far wider transformations. Prime minister, later president, Aleksandar Vučić explained that the model was crucial for a whole range of the "most important questions that we [Serbians] have to answer about . . . employment, GDP growth, standards of living, European integration" (Chamber of Commerce

and Industry of Serbia 2016). The positive impact of dual education on employment is obvious, but the discussion of the GDP, for instance, was not limited to growth from such increased employment: dual education was also seen as attracting FDI. This is based both on public statements such as the one above, and on research interviews with representatives of both the Serbian Chamber of Commerce and the GIZ (Đunda 2017, 10). FDI, in turn, is centrally located in the regional economic imaginaries and placed within wider civilisation aspirations of "European integration"—this is illustrated in Vučić's words, and I will return to it in Chapter 6. In short, advocates of dual education presented it as a key element in the negotiations that facilitate the arrival of FDI in Serbia, while its opponents condemned it as another way of favouring big capital at the expense of citizens (see Oprljan 2017).

Contrary to the research that analyses and critiques NFE as a process of governmentalisation intended to shape the population to a particular ideal, inquiring into youth unemployment uncovers a quiet coexistence of radically *different* ways of preparing young people for the labour market. One of these nurtures an entrepreneurial spirit and self-employment, and the other creates a narrowly skilled workforce ready to be harnessed by the private sector (within the country or abroad).

Resistance

The added value of an ethnographic approach to governmentality as/in NFE is "the importance of local agency, resistance, and contestation in processes of neoliberal subject creation" (Sukarieh 2016, 1201). This section focuses on the contestation I observed. But before moving on to some of these encounters, it is necessary to qualify the label of "resistance" that I attach to these people and events—especially because the focus on resistance is often celebrated as a particular local input and a panacea for the liberal peace (Iñiguez de Heredia 2017; Kappler and Richmond 2011; Mac Ginty 2011; Richmond 2010; 2011b). In this literature, resistance is conceptualised as "critical agency" capable of countering IR's usual view of contestation as cemented in a position of "inferiority, irrelevance, illiberalism, spoiling or injustice" (Richmond 2011b, 426). Coming from a different angle, anti-colonial approaches find in resistance the local subjecthood that is usually silenced in critiques of liberal peace—resistance thus again provides an opportunity to learn from the targets of intervention and their political analyses (Sabaratnam 2017).

While building on both approaches, my engagement with these practices and narratives is different. I do not approach them with the goal of finding the authentic "grassroots," nor do I unquestioningly embrace the "in-country critiques of foreign presence" (Rutazibwa 2019, 66) as necessarily progressive. On the contrary, I engage them here to create space for more complex, and perhaps more contradictory, images of local subjects.

Foucault (1978, 95) famously argued that "where there is power, there is resistance." But he also added that "this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power." One of the most important contributions of governmentality studies is the impossibility of a clear delineation between power and that which resists it. While some read this as pessimism inscribed in Foucault's thinking, my own approach is more sanguine (see McNay 2009). Rather than looking for the "authentic" local that might stand outside of and resist the global narratives that I examine, I approach subjectivities as always relational and made in complex matrices of power. Resistance being shaped by the power it is supposed to challenge does not disqualify it. Instead, I see it as transgression that can both change political life and inform our studies of it. Hence I use the label resistance "lightly"—as an important diagnostic of both power and its effects, but without inscribing in it inherently revolutionary potential.

During my stay in Belgrade, protests began that moved to other cities and towns: first around the urban redevelopment of the "Belgrade Waterfront" and then to contest the 2017 elections (see Fagan and Ejdus 2020; Grubbauer and Čamprag 2019; Matković and Ivković 2018). These popular mobilisations are closely connected to the statebuilding project in Serbia. Decades of international efforts have led citizens to lose faith in both state institutions (which have increasingly engaged in spending cuts and austerity measures) and international actors, especially the EU, that are seen "as being responsible for the institution-building of the last fifteen years and the state failure resulting from such policies" (Džuverović and Milošević 2020, 191). I, however, did not shift my fieldwork focus to these organised protests. This might be evidence of my own reliance on the parameters of intervention even when I argue explicitly against them. However, my choices were due to my attempts to give space to the nuances of political thought and action *within* what would usually be understood as a depoliticised and governmentalised sphere of NFE. Within these fields I found complex negotiations and positionings.

More than showing the incompleteness of any intervention and demonstrating the urgency of inquiring more closely into their "grounded" effects, NFE also provided instances when narratives and practices of intervention

in NFE were contested. These instances paint a more complex vision of the local subject: one that fits neither the "Balkan backwardness" nor the "local emancipation" narratives neatly. Instead, the resistance I found was malleable, always related to international as much as local ideas, and often contradictory. Instead of showing us a road to the "real local," it points to a more complex subjecthood and more varied engagements with power.

Narratives of Nation and Class

In the semester course for youth from right-wing political parties that I attended, one of the lectures was on fiscal politics. In demonstrating the economism that we were supposed to be taught that day (and generally in the course), the speaker used an example of a "useless" highway. The road was built between Čačak, a small town in southern Serbia, and the Adriatic coast in Montenegro, and was habitually described as a bad investment: there is not enough industry in the region to warrant the cost of building a highway.

A simple illustration led into a heated discussion. A young man from southern Serbia raised his hand to argue against dismissing the highway as impractical: the region is extremely isolated, and without the highway and a better connection to Serbia its people cannot hope to develop an industry that would use such a highway.[3] The speaker stood his ground, but another young woman joined the discussion. She said that these kinds of investments cannot be looked at just "economically," but as something for the "good of the town or the village" (*dobrobit za grad ili selo*)—cost-benefit (used in English) analysis is not enough; something needs to be done for citizens for the common good (*opće dobro*), and not just for political points (*političke poene*). Mentioning the "common good" was not surprising—this was a course for parties that very much rely on ideas of nationhood and the "common good" it creates. However, since the "Right" in Serbia in 2016 also included the neoliberal and libertarian Right, participants from a technocratic libertarian party were also present. Vlado, a representative of this technocratic party, did not agree: such considerations are futile; anything besides a pure cost-benefit analysis ends up with each "pulling to their own village [*svako samo vuče na svoje selo*]" because the "common good" is only a veneer for "buying votes" by providing goods and services.

3. One of the benefits of this course was that the participants were geographically varied since they all received funds for transport to and from Belgrade for each session.

There was no definite conclusion to the discussion, but it is worth pointing out that economism here is not only imagined as neoliberal progress, but also as a specific cure to the corruption of "everyone trying to work only for their own village." As already discussed in Chapter 3, neoliberal ideals employed here are not rootless global ideas, but respond to images of local failings, as they are expected to "purify" the politics of both Balkan and post-socialist backwardness. Admittedly, it might not be wrong to want to develop one's home, but in these comments such aspirations are not simply benevolent efforts to help specific communities but calculated moves to stay in power by "buying" votes with symbolic gestures.

The challenges to the speaker's economism were a particular form of resistance. In the case of this course, it was resistance framed around nationalist and often populist demands. My observations were similar to those of Hemment (2015), who studied the Nashi activists in a Russian university. They saw "themselves as civic warriors, fierce and righteous individuals who, in a corrective to the disparaged politics as usual, engage[d] in forms of direct action to educate an ill-informed, apathetic public"(93). Many people I spoke to saw themselves as primarily fighting the "good fight." Even though they subscribed to extreme party lines around the status of Kosovo, LGBT+ rights, and gender, their everyday activism related to employment, local community issues, and either vehemently supporting or opposing the ruling party (the course's definition of right wing included both the ruling party and several of its right-wing oppositional parties).

The neoliberal orientation of the course was reflected in the speakers. We had a lecture on ordo-liberalism using the same thinkers that Foucault teases apart in his lectures. We were told that any effort at redistribution is "buying votes." We were taught that only private property protects: buffalos are extinct because no one owned them, while privately owned cows are doing well.[4] When encountering these issues abstractly, the students were responsive: technocracy meant facing the corruption that is obviously hurting the country—neoliberalism was again a "purification." However, when faced with more practical examples of economism, as in the example above, the students rebelled by invoking the good of the community and the nation. Yet, unlike Mayssoun Sukarieh's (2016) experience in Jordan, where class was used to challenge neoliberal narratives, here I saw nationalism as an alternative that pays more attention to the common good.

The two narratives mixed in complex ways. One of the most eagerly

4. Paradoxically, the illustrative example also points to the welfare (or lack thereof) of cows in industrial farming and highlights the suffering that is occluded by a focus on profit.

awaited speakers was a German politician whose visit was a special occasion: it was attended by the representative of the foundation that funded the course, and the project manager was visibly nervous: used to dealing with the young people attending the course, she was now performing for the people funding her employment. The politician was there to speak about the German model of a social market economy. He presented the basic tenets of the model known as Rhine capitalism and put them in conversation with global economic and political challenges. Yet, as soon as the Q&A was open, a very different topic emerged. The students prepared for this visit: they knew he had left politics in 2010 and had since become a successful businessman and the designer of one of the most famous FDI projects in Serbia. The investment that opened for business in 2013 and expanded ever since was controversial. It was presented as the revival of the ruined Serbian auto industry, and at the same time heavily criticised along with other government efforts to subsidise FDI. With each employee receiving a salary of around EUR 200 per month, and the company subsidised by thousands of euros, many were (and still are) wondering about the financial logic of such projects (see Istinomer 2016).

The Q&A immediately opened with questions about investments in Serbia: How did he decide to come? Why? What place does Serbia have in the long-term business plans? The politician turned investor explained the choice to come to Serbia by comparing it to two other options: one being in Southeast Asia and the other in Bulgaria. Southeast Asia proved inferior because it had higher transport costs due to distance, and a less trained workforce. Bulgaria, on the other hand, was deemed politically less stable and therefore less able to provide state support for procuring licences (for example, for emissions). In this narrative, Serbia emerged as the winner of the race to the bottom: labour was cheap but qualified, the state was strong enough to both provide financial subsidies and to "move" legislation and licences, and it was close enough to the European market. Hearing it put this simply, I braced for the expected storm: while the aspiring technocrats in the audience might accept this economism, the nationalists would surely intervene!

I was very wrong. Even though there were many hands in the air after this explanation, the students did not aim to challenge this narrative, but to appropriate it: Is there a chance for an investment in a different region? What exactly would investors need to consider opening more factories elsewhere? Do they know that there are free trade zones opening around the

country?[5] Instead of condemning exploitation, my classmates saw it as the only opportunity for development and *invited* it.

This peculiar mix of neoliberal narratives and nationalist contestation, and the motley results of their encounters, become especially important in many debates on the importance of "the local" for international interventions. In these debates, nationalism and the rejection of both economic and social progressiveness could be read as an "authentic" challenge to global neoliberalism. My observations, on the other hand, show that neoliberalism can be embraced by nationalism, and even rejected on almost the same grounds. Instead of seeing the neoliberal international intervention in *conflict* with local nationalism, making sense of the observations in the course requires seeing both the intervention and nationalism changing together in what Tamara Vukov has referred to as "the dance of neoliberalism and nationalism" (2013, 170). This entwinement—within both state institutions and individual subjects—invites us to reconsider how we conceptualise power and its subjects: away from narratives of "good" or "bad" locals, to recognising that liberal power is always heterogenous and met in diverse ways.

A "Left" Politics of Emancipation

Even though the "dual education" policy is seemingly built on a broad coalition—supported by business and government, the state and international agencies, and even including reference to the World Bank, as by the prime minister, Vučić, in the speech quoted earlier—there are also alternative visions that see the policy as exploitative and damaging. An article published on the portal *Bilten* summarises the critique well: the dual education policy exploits both the children who are not adequately paid for their work and the state that subsidises the programme (Dragojlo 2016). In doing so, it reproduces class differences because children from lower-class families will be trapped by an education that provides skills specific to employers who thus increase their power. Moreover, this education precludes any kind of *political* education that might happen in more traditional classroom settings (Dragojlo 2016).

The article points to a different conception of citizenship, democracy, and development. However, I do not cite it here as only a well-written nar-

5. For more on the free trade zones in Serbia, see the book by Milenko Srećković (2015b).

rative, but also because the portal on which it is published, *Bilten*, is itself a product of a transnational "educational project." It is funded (partially) by a leftist German political foundation that funds many "new left" social movements in the region. It cooperates closely with *Mašina*, a similar website in Serbia. It is precisely this broad coalition of groups that attended the public consultations of the Draft of the Law on Dual Education with slogans like "A child is not a commodity" and "Children are not cheap labour" (Insajder 2017a). These groups also organised the many events around broadly leftist and feminist topics that I attended: at the beginning of the lecture, we would all "sign in" on sheets that looked like they were used for proving "impact" to donors.

The organisations coordinating these events and assembling protests partake in the design and competition of international funding schemes. Their involvement can be seen as practices of competition and projectivisation meant to depoliticise, yet it seems that the "real goal" of the initiatives they funded was re-politicisation through educational activities. The sentiment was best captured in an interview with Bojan, a Serbian employee of a foreign political foundation's Belgrade office. As I explained my interest in the organisation's activities and their place in Serbia's socio-political landscape, Bojan was very clear that his foundation—and the people whom they funded and employed—is *not* a part of civil society in Serbia. This stands in contrast with both its registered status in Serbia and its aim of supporting NGOs in the region. Bojan explained that this is because the current vision of civil society in Serbia is indubitably *apolitical*, as it works through concepts like advocacy, democracy, and rule of law. His foundation is different from the larger programmes that seek to move people away from grassroots activism and radical political imaginaries: "Our way of working leaves us the option to avoid pacifying these groups; they keep something like their own politics and their own political identity. And they really talk, they really somehow enact politics [*zaista nekako sprovode politiku*] in different ways close to them" (interview, April 13, 2016).

Bojan was aware of the difficulties of an activist life, and therefore explicitly sought to provide a somewhat steady income to people the foundation worked with. They should not worry about paying rent, filling out form after form, or having another job that would cover their living expense—activism should be their job, and the foundation's funds are used for that purpose. The activists' use of funds steps outside of the market rationality of calls, competitions, and transparency. In his narrative, Bojan was clear that it is precisely this stepping out that places his organisation outside civil

society in Serbia. Civil society here was presented at the same time as *apolitical*, by serving as a platform for elite class formation, and as a very *political* submission to narratives of liberalism and EU accession. This organisation refused both.

In all of these examples, we see "the copresence, entanglements, and mixings of political and antipolitical moments and rationalities" (Vorbrugg 2015, 141). Practices of NGO funding and NFE that are usually understood as depoliticising are re-appropriated and put to work for explicitly political goals. Actors used NFE and other interventions to advocate for a different vision of political life—one that conceptualised the state, the citizen, and society in ways that diverge from the dominant operative narratives of funding bodies.

This has far-reaching consequences for how we think about intervention. It not only highlights the value of methodologies that inquire into the minute and micro, but also paints a different picture of local subjects and international processes they engage. Local subjects are not just victims of the "same old" neoliberal structures but political agents on multiple scales whose encounters often do not fit predetermined ideas.

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This chapter brought to fore the ways in which experiences of youth in non-formal education move beyond orthodox understandings of intervention and governmentalisation. First, it expanded the fields of visibility within which I looked for acts and effects of intervention as it followed the experiences of NFE participants away from NFE and into unemployment. With this, new acts came into view: programmes developed to combat youth unemployment uncovered specific diagnoses of problems and offered solutions in the form of self-improvement, networks, and clear delineations between those meant to succeed in the domestic class of elites, those migrating to find their luck, and those becoming the "affordable labour" meant to propel the country in the now popular vision of progress through FDI.

It would be tempting to interpret these developments along the lines of liberalism as the aim of intervention. They could be seen as successes of governmentalisation (young people being compelled towards self-betterment), its failures (the idea of a business plan as a "form to fill in" rather than an expression of human worth), or reversals ("vocational" education as a disciplinary, rather than a governmentalising, power). Such evaluations, however, become obsolete if we deny the myth of liberalism. The coexistence of very different tools of youth engagement—NFE that fosters creativity and voca-

tional training/emigration that aims at providing affordable workforce in a neoliberal race to the bottom—complicates any verdict on the liberal or illiberal aims and outcomes of statebuilding and development interventions. Treating these political constellations as coeval, rather than possible setbacks or distortions along the road of liberalism, changes the question we should be asking: instead of future-oriented questions of transition and becoming, we can see how current—coeval—developments re-conceptualise liberalism as always heterogenous.

Liberal and neoliberal narratives and practices of intervention were engaged and contested and at times fuelled the politics that they are supposed to eradicate. The added value of an ethnographic approach here is precisely in problematising the clear-cut reading of governmentality that we see in the intentions of governing. In a similar project on an NFE activity in Jordan, Sukarieh highlights a "complex relation between the intentionality of planning and the strategic intelligibility of outcomes" (2016, 1203). It is this intelligibility that confronts us when trying to study the effects of interventions from the experiences of its targets. The prescribed meritocracy and individualism resulted in civil society as an elite formation and network of professionals. Instead of posing a limit to government, its role became employment and self-interest. On the other hand, the acts meant to depoliticise and cement the limits of political thought and action were contested by similar international donors and identical NFE practices. Instead of firmly drawn lines between the political and anti-political, we saw people practising politics in whatever ways accessible. Acts of intervention were inspiring, rather than eliminating political contestation.

There is also an important methodological point to be made here. Thinking alongside the young people I met in NFE required looking beyond the acts of intervention that revolved around political education into unemployment as an analytically productive lived experience. Beyond specific techniques of recruitment, the networks developed through them, and the types of knowledge produced in these projects, I also had to understand unemployment as a discourse and a material reality. This included attending to the wider historical transformations of civil society in Serbia that created the civil society sector as a particular class of employment, lifestyle, and political identity—at the same time promoting a culture of entrepreneurialism and the precarious labour relations within it. Perhaps most importantly, I had to pay attention not only to the people present in the seminars, but also to most of the Serbian youth missing from these activities but similarly embroiled in global formations of labour and value.

This is not solely an issue of changing a research question or narrating the "surpluses" of fieldwork. It points to the exclusions immanent in the concept of intervention that must be faced in the process of coeval engagement. Coeval engagement is not the same as ethnography: what was important was not limited to what I could see, hear, or participate in firsthand. The young people seeking employment through dual education or emigration do not attend the "political" NFE activities, and therefore I had little contact with them during my fieldwork. On the contrary, coevalness here meant pushing at the constitutive exclusions of my own methodology.

CHAPTER 5

Governing Agriculture through "Europeanisation"

Producing and distributing food is an intensely political project. In Serbia, agriculture is a historically important part of identity and the economy, and part of the "return to Europe"—an ideal that encompasses both the official EU negotiations and a wider civilisational change. I arrived in Serbia with the aim of investigating the process of Europeanisation, but getting access to policymakers in the Ministry of Agriculture and Environmental Protection, or those on the negotiating team for the accession to the EU, proved more difficult than expected. My emails were rarely responded to, and when replies did arrive, I received detailed reports and many links but could not get anyone to talk to me. An opening unexpectedly emerged in one of the non-formal education courses I attended. The speaker for the class that day was one of the main EU negotiators—a confident, knowledgeable, and quick-thinking man in his forties. It was obvious that he enjoyed the challenge of EU negotiations. He was adamant that negotiations are "not really negotiating anything" because the EU standards are predefined—it is *how*, not *if*, these will be implemented in Serbia that is "negotiated." But the "us versus them" rhetoric snuck into his stories, and he was obviously energised by the challenge.

I approached him after his talk to ask for advice on how to continue in my study of agriculture. When I explained that I was interested in the transformations of agriculture, he was noticeably excited, and I was increasingly optimistic about my prospects for studying the world of these adroit policymakers. In a brief conversation about agriculture in Serbia he played with the Serbian translation of "agriculture" as "field economy" (*poljoprivreda*: *polje* = field, *privreda* = economy) and pointed out that the biggest trans-

formation of *poljoprivreda* needed is for the people involved to start acting as though it is in fact *privreda*—people must understand it as an *economy* and behave according to economic rationalities. I was (perhaps naively) shocked by such a straightforward economisation and neoliberal reasoning, but my further work in agriculture (indeed substantially helped by this EU negotiator) proved the importance of this image. In this and the following chapter, I show the complex reality of this image, which reaches far beyond the thematic and temporal confines of fields of visibility prescribed by "EU negotiations."

In agriculture, in lieu of a liberal peace package, we observe a modern agriculture package underpinned by similar values of entrepreneurship, market competition, the "right" form of government, and specific subjectivities. For example, in the Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development of the Republic of Serbia for 2014–2024, the goal is unequivocally to "set the basis for new agricultural policies, defined along the principles of modern public policy and the clear orientation of the Ministry [of Agriculture and Environmental Protection] towards the taking on of a European model of agricultural support" (Službeni glasnik RS 85/2014 2014). The document details the changes needed to implement the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the legal framework stipulated in the *acquis communautaire*, and the institutional reforms required to harmonise administrative structures with those of the EU. Similarly, a spate of policy-oriented publications were produced and published with EU accession in sight, evaluating the "approximation" and "integration" processes in the Western Balkan countries (e.g., Bajramović et al. 2019; Volk, Erjavec, and Mortensen 2014);

The goals of "modern" policy and the "EU model" of agriculture are worth paying closer attention to. Modernity here relates to both institutions and forms of production. In Serbia and most of Southern Europe, agriculture is characterised by a large number of very small farms, a high proportion of subsistence and semi-subsistence producers, lower inputs, and accordingly lower yields (Berkum and Bogdanov 2012). This structure is usually referred as a "dual structure of production": it is dominated by very small semi-subsistence producers (who mostly farm along with holding other employment) and, on the other hand, large (often formerly state-run) enterprises. While small producers might be celebrated in food sovereignty and activist circles that see precisely this kind of agriculture as the antidote to the industrial food complex, in policy circles and agribusiness they represent a problem of "backwardness" to be overcome by adopting EU models.

In this chapter, I look at the agents and acts that aim at transforming agriculture in line with modern ideals of "Europe." While agriculture seems

a narrow, and perhaps still surprising, field for the study of international politics, it offers unique insight into politics generally and the politics of intervention more specifically. CAP, for example, sheds light on the making of the EU: food supply, alongside war and market integration, was and is "a formative space" where "centralized governing authority" emerged and is applied (Biebuyck 2016, 2). Beyond Europe, agriculture has been essential in development practices and serves as a powerful illustration of the "postcolonial" condition (Gupta 2003). Globally, the government of food is becoming transversal and is moving into the control of non-state actors that might initially be perceived as removed from the political realm (Higgins and Lawrence 2005). Scholars like Gearoid Millar (2016a; 2016b; 2015), Andreas Hirblinger (2015), and Meera Sabaratnam (2017) have started to explore agriculture as an important dimension of the liberal intervention machine: land tenure, microfinance projects, marketisation, and good governance of agriculture are increasingly recognised as crucial aspects of post-conflict reconstruction.

Following this line of research, this chapter focusses on Europeanisation efforts that transform three different subjects: civil servants in the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy,[1] NGOs, and producers. At the same time, I develop these observations to push against the conceptual confines of intervention acts, agents, and aims. Issues that this chapter considers, such as the transformations of expertise in government offices and beyond, experiences of working in the public sector, and the division between producers who are expected to become entrepreneurs and peasants who are expected to disappear, cannot be subsumed in the narrative of a successful or failed governmentality, but rather point to complex dynamics of the politics of improvement.

The chapter proceeds in two main sections. The first section provides an overview of the historical context and the immediate post-war changes in agricultural governance. Introducing this history pushes against the temporal parameters of intervention thinking, and highlights that market experiments and modes of government that focus on individual subjectivities are not radically novel and exclusive to contemporary neoliberalism. The second section reviews the current efforts to transform civil servants, peasants, and

1. Here I focus on a ministry that changed its name shortly after I completed my fieldwork. During my fieldwork, it was still the Ministry of Agriculture and Environmental Protection. With the EU requirements stipulating the separation of those two remits, change came after the 2017 election, making it the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy. To avoid confusion, I shorten this latter to "the Ministry." When talking about another ministry, I specify the full name.

civil society in the processes of Europeanisation. While a governmentality lens is useful for understanding how intervention proceeds through subject creation, this chapter also goes beyond it. It shows that intervention programmes depend on multiple images of their subjects, that they are always incomplete, and that understanding the effects of intervention requires thinking at the intersection of local and global dynamics.

Agriculture as Politics and Ideology

Past Political Projects

Before moving to the particularities of intervention as Europeanisation, I want to pre-empt two common readings of externally aided governance reforms: that they are the "first contact" of non-Western spaces with neoliberalism, and that the governmental techniques they use to transform subjects are radically new. Even before World War I, agriculture mirrored the more general forms of rule in Southeast Europe. For example, the Ottoman occupation in Serbia worked through the millet system—non-Islamic subjects were treated as "protected persons" who were guaranteed their religious autonomy, and they were also nominally free sharecroppers with de facto hereditary rights on land property (Vujačić 2015).[2] In Vojvodina, an area that switched between Austro-Hungarian and a short period of Ottoman rule, land was used in the process of "colonisation": mostly German, but also Croatian, French, Italian, Slovak, Armenian, Rumanian, and later Hungarian peasants were relocated in order to repopulate previously abandoned areas and pay taxes to fund defence against the Ottoman Empire. Larger pieces of land were given to the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches and other elites, and the peasants who received land through the process of colonisation were often the victims of enclosure practices (Tomasevich 1955, 135). The echoes of these policies are still visible: Vojvodina has larger estates than the rest of the country, and its ethnic makeup is still diverse.

In both Vojvodina and the rest of what is today Serbia, the pre–World War I population was largely made up of poor, often landless, peasants. They were seen by those in power as unruly, uncivilised, and unprepared for

2. This is a necessary oversimplification of the tenure system. For a detailed account of land tenure practices during the Byzantine and Ottoman rule in Serbia, see Chapter 1 (Serbia) and Chapter 5 (Vojvodina) in Tomasevich (1955).

integration into the increasingly capitalist markets. And even though peasants were present in both political and artistic life throughout twentieth century Yugoslavia (see Novakov-Ritchey 2022), policies were devised around a denigrating image of the peasant. For example, as protection against gambling debts, peasants were formally banned from using their land and property for obtaining credit (even when this forced them to go to usurers for non-gambling debt as well). Similarly, "unnecessary feasting" was widely discussed and admonished (Tomasevich 1955, 44–46). Here we not only see the subjects that the Yugoslav modernisation project sought to engage, but also the early sources of ruralophobia (still present today) that sees peasants as unprepared for producing and living in modern capitalist markets. In all stages of the Yugoslav project, agriculture was both an *object* of government to be reformed and a *tool* for reforming the population. Progressive land and agricultural reforms reflected Yugoslavia's holistic vision that brought together economic, social, and political life.

Yet the experiences of agricultural policy point to the underlining tensions in Yugoslav socialist political rationalities that stem from the ways in which peasants were imagined as subjects: as objects, tools, and obstacles to socialist transformation. Peasants were explicitly engaged by the first major land reform conducted in 1919 with the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (the First Yugoslavia). Jozo Tomasevich (1955, 344) describes this reform as the "final phase" in the long "realization of the idea that the land belongs to those who till it"—an idea that moved many national movements against crumbling empires, and which was supported by the arrival of "democratic and liberal ideas of Western Europe. Large Austro-Hungarian estates were redistributed by the state to former serfs (*kmetovi*) who became free landowning individuals. Around 1.7 million hectares of land were given to landless people, with priority given to soldiers who fought in World War I and their families. The land was also used for a process of "colonisation": ethnically Serbian war veterans and the poor were relocated to border areas in Vojvodina, Slavonija, Macedonia, and Metohija and elsewhere in Kosovo to own and work small parcels of land (Giordano 2014).[3]

The land reform was supposed to abolish all remaining feudal and quasi-feudal institutions. By expropriating land from large estates, the

3. It is important to note the twofold use of the term "colonisation" here. On one hand, it was a policy that was a part of the land reform, and studies of agricultural reforms use it at such. On the other hand, it can also be seen as a part of settler colonialism, especially in Kosovo (see Rexhepi 2023, 14).

reforms were to satisfy landless and small peasants. Yet the process was far from perfect: the reform included a "recognition of the principle that former landowners have to receive an indemnity for their land," and its effects are long debated (Tomasevich 1955, 349, 370–82). Peasants were supposed to repay the cost of the land to its former estate owners, a fact that facilitated the creation of indentured labour. Land distribution was distorted by corruption and negotiations with landowning elites, and the reform itself was never really finished or successful (Lazić 1999; cited in Srećković 2015a). So, despite the policies of the reform being described as progressive, the inequality in landownership grew, and peasants themselves, although sometimes comprising up to 90 percent of the population, suffered deteriorating living conditions.

In post–World War II Yugoslavia, the "peasant question" emerged. While the main goals of agricultural and land policy are often interpreted as nothing less than the abolishment of capitalist relations and the socialist transformation of villages, there were very distinct disagreements on post-war agricultural policy, both within the state and between the state and the peasants, who fought back against what they perceived as injustice (Bokovoy 1998). The communist authorities were in great debt to the peasants, as they hid and fought in the countryside from 1941 to 1945. But they were also inspired by the Soviet policies of collectivisation that peasants would not agree to. Even though giving "land to the peasants" was a natural companion to the popular slogan of "factories to the people," it is precisely this *ownership* that made the state suspicious. Here the peasant is again cast as a problem. Peasant men and women were seen as "a traditional, pre-capitalist element" that is more difficult for a socialist project to engage than industrial workers, who were more typical actors (Radenković and Solar 2018, 155). Moreover, because of their landownership and "the interest in the tractor" as a form of means of production, the individual producer was seen as an "anti-socialist and capitalist element" (Horvat 2016 [1976], 349–50).

Agricultural policy in Yugoslavia can be understood in three phases: *etatist* collectivisation from 1949 to 1953, a focus on cooperation as an alternative to collectivisation in 1954–1965, and the laissez-faire approach from 1965 (Horvat 2016 [1976], 88–102). A short detour into this history helps us understand the existing forms of agriculture and landownership, points to much longer standing experiments with the free market, and demonstrates the international positioning of a seemingly local issue. The first period was marked by efforts to collectivise agriculture based on the Soviet model. While the aim was creating peasant working cooperatives, it was always clear that they are only the means to achieve the more general goal of socialist

transformation (Tochitch 1959, 27). Accordingly, this was also the time of improving peasants' lives, with explicitly paternalistic policies that targeted everything from gender relations to literacy (Simić 2018).

The state tried to encourage peasants to join the cooperatives voluntarily by developing different types of cooperatives (with different models of land tenure) and allowing them to keep their land, thus diverging significantly from the Soviet model—an issue we will return to in the following chapter. Increased productivity and a general rise in the standard of living were supposed to encourage peasants to let go of their attachment to private ownership of land. Even though collectivisation was nominally voluntary, in reality, "severe administrative and political pressures," under the label of "curbing capitalist elements in the village," targeted the peasants to facilitate the transformation (Horvat 2016 [1976], 229–30).

The complete transformation of rural organisation failed to materialise. People would kill the livestock they were not allowed to keep under private ownership upon entering a cooperative, and cooperative property was destroyed in acts of sabotage. Peasants also speculated with property so as to transform most of it into *okućnica*, small plots of land the peasants could keep as private property, thus minimising the value that they would be bringing into the cooperative (Tochitch 1959). All these acts of resistance led to significantly decreased productivity, and the Soviet model of collectivisation was abandoned in 1953 (Bokovoy 1998; 2014). The land maximum was lowered further, and the extra land was mostly given to agricultural enterprises.

This second period (1954–1965) of agricultural policy discussed by Horvat (2016 [1976]) focussed on cooperation, but it already saw the use of the free market as a tool for transformation: it was supposed to teach the peasants that they had to either intensify their production through modernisation (joining the cooperatives that had technology made available by the state) or leave agriculture altogether and move to the growing industrial sector, which was in desperate need of workers (Horvat 2016 [1976]; McVicker 1957). Moreover, by abandoning the efforts at collectivisation and substituting them for "socialisation" (*podruštvljavanje*—meaning the transformation of private property into "socially owned property"), Yugoslavia set out on a specific path to socialism that, as we will see, further complicated the issue of landownership (see Luković 2015). This period also saw the characteristic dual development of agriculture: large collective production and small individual production connected by the concept of cooperation.

The structure of landownership and the agriculture it sustains is shaped

as much by individual experiences as by utopian state policies. Starting in 1961, peasants who were given small plots of land were free to sell them. And they largely did so by entering cooperatives (*zadruge*).[4] As explained to me in an interview with a retired expert on *zadruge*, this was done for very practical reasons: the child benefits that peasants would get from being employed as workers in cooperatives were more than the income they could get off their land. This created a boom in the land controlled by cooperatives: in the period of 1961–1968, cooperatives bought more than 190,000 hectares of agricultural land. Peasants were restricted by the land maximum, which was decreased to 10 hectares, and they used the cooperatives to expand production. They gave up their earnings from the cooperatives and used the money to collectively purchase and lease land, equipment, machinery, and expertise. Since cooperatives did not have any land restrictions to abide by, they provided an opportunity for expansion. All these resources were used to work on cooperative land, as well as the small plots the peasants could keep as *okućnica*.[5] Because property could not be listed as cooperative property, in this way land was socialised and the socially owned sector in the country grew—an issue that emerged as crucial in constitutional changes in the 1990s that did not make space for social ownership.

After the 1965 general reform in the economy, agriculture policy started to rely heavily on the market. In this third stage of Yugoslav agricultural policy, "Producers would be left to themselves" as a laissez-faire approach became dominant (Horvat 2016 [1976], 346). After 1968, the market assumed an even more prominent role as the state completely retreated from regulatory functions. This led to rising prices, imports under dumping prices (lower in the importing country than in the market of the exporting country), and an overall stagnation in agricultural development. Horvat defines the nature of the problem theoretically: the cooperative was treated at the same time as a business/economic unit that should be governed by market rationality without implicating the state, but also as an "agricultural station that should educate and help the backward to adopt modern agrotechnology without charging the full value of the services provided" (2016 [1976], 376). In a way, its market rationality was in tension with its socialist goals.

4. Cooperatives were built on *zadruge* as a historical form of organising rural kinship and labour. Accordingly, it received a spate of attention in anthropology. For a short overview, see the discussion by Čarna Brković (2018).

5. Along with works cited in this section, I am obliged to thank Branislav Gulan and Đorđe Bugarin for talking me through this history and their accounts of the experiences of different state policies.

While space prevents further discussion of the tensions and roles of market rationalities in Yugoslav socialism (see Bockman 2011), it is important to note that the marketisation that many critique as liberal hubris of the 1990s has a much longer history.

Wartime Decline and Post-war Reconstruction

The complete transformation of the social order in Serbia in the 1990s had a paradoxical effect in agriculture. Many people from the cities returned to (semi-)subsistence farming in rural areas to complement their disappearing incomes, while official markets collapsed. This, on the one hand, meant that farmers producing for the market were destroyed by inflation. On the other hand, as one of my interlocutors explained, those who were brave enough used the opportunity to expand in the times of crisis. The easiest way to expand (if you were able to hide from the mandatory military draft) was to take on huge bank loans, buy land and machinery, and then pay only a fraction of the loan back after inflation had reduced the cost of the loan (interview, October 4, 2016).

These brave agricultural entrepreneurs, however, were not numerous enough to keep agricultural production at a level that would allow the market to continue to function. The big cooperative and state-owned enterprises were especially hurt by the disappearance of the Yugoslav market. Serbia entered the 2000s with destroyed infrastructure and large enterprises in ruin. A country report produced for the European Commission in 2006 states that to begin its transition, Serbia needed to both increase agricultural output in general and create a land market that would govern the 25 percent of land that was state owned ("Country Report: Serbia" 2006, 8). The amount of this land, however, was much smaller than in other countries in East Europe because Yugoslavia abandoned efforts at collectivisation early (in 1953). The same 2006 report estimated that out of 5.1 million hectares (some 66 percent of total land), 3.6 million hectares were arable (including permanent crops), and 350,000 to 380,000 hectares state owned.

The early 2000s saw a major shift in the government of agriculture and the first efforts at EU-led institution building. This is best observed in two documents: the 2004 Strategy for Serbian Agriculture (Strategija poljoprivrede Srbije) and the 2006 Law on Agricultural Land. The technocratic government in power was explicitly oriented towards international financial institutions, and it created agricultural policies accordingly. The 2004 Strategy is controversial. It was officially a product of technical assistance aid to

Serbia, developed in cooperation between EU experts and the Ministry of Agriculture in 2004, and adopted in the parliament in 2005. However, it was widely criticised for not being written *with the help* of a foreign expert (a Dutch expert employed on the EU twinning programme), but *by* a foreign expert, with the knowledge and approval of the minister of agriculture (Naumović 2013, 64, 112)—an issue that captured the public's imagination in debates that might resemble discussions on local ownership.

Yet, it matters little who wrote the document. The Strategy was written in line with the liberal peace narrative and had an explicit neoliberal orientation: a focus on privatisation, encouraging production for the market, limiting the Ministry's role to fostering a well-functioning market, and thus abstaining from both advising on comparative advantages and any possible protectionist measures (Naumović 2013, 64–66). The minister was aware of implications of the reform and anticipated resistance and criticism, but there simply was no viable alternative (Naumović 2013, 65). The Strategy was made in an encounter of neoliberalism that dominated the discussions of post-communist transitions globally, with the local historical experiments with markets in Yugoslavia.

The same dynamic can be observed in the Law on Agricultural Land from 2006. Mladen, one of the designers of the 2006 law, explained its creation in a long narrative interview. He started by telling me that he "really believes in the market" and that the law was designed precisely to create a well-functioning market that would "transfer the land into the hands of those most productive and efficient farmers" (interview, October 4, 2016). The market was (and still is) needed to develop a middle class of farmers who would carry Serbian agriculture away from unproductive smallholders and inefficient state enterprises. In his desire to develop the middle class of farmers, Mladen was clear that it was his way of imagining Serbia becoming a global actor—subsistence and semi-subsistence peasants cannot participate in the global markets that Serbia was returning to after a long decade of international isolation, but middle-size farmers can. Similar to Yugoslav imaginations of agricultural government, we see the market's role conceptualised as both *introducing* new subjectivities and *guiding* their behaviour.

Engagement with subjects outside the temporal confines of the intervention highlights two things. First, the government of agriculture (and its experiences) always reflected the ideological, political, and economic dynamics of the time—whether that was creating "new socialist men" in place of the pre-socialist peasants, as was the case with the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia reforms, or explicitly turning towards neoliberalism in the early 2000s. Agriculture makes visible connections between wider visions of gov-

ernment and individual subjectivities. However, as already mentioned in Chapter 2, I do not treat these blueprints as anthropological facts, that is, as literally translated into reality, but as schemes with often unexpected consequences, which I examine in the following section.

Second, the schemes of agricultural government in Yugoslavia always developed in intricate relationship with empires, foreign policies, and global flows of ideas. The Ottoman and Hapsburg Empires drew the lines still visible on the makeup of farms in the region, Soviet influence (and lack thereof) was crucial in processes of collectivisation, and neoliberal policies in the early 2000s were created in the rush to return to the fold of international organisations. The government of agriculture in Serbia always focussed on the transformation of peasants as political, social, and economic subjects, but it imagined them not just as local actors, but as participants in global politics. As the next section shows, this remains true today.

Governing Agriculture through EU Integration

The technical expression of Europeanisation is the official EU accession process, the so-called negotiations (*pregovori*). Serbia applied for EU membership in December 2009 and was given candidate status in 2012. The official negotiations started in January 2014, with the first two chapters opened in December 2014. This enormous process of institution building through legislative harmonisation is divided into thirty-five chapters, and agriculture comes out as especially important. This is not just because CAP is famously the EU's biggest expenditure (ca. EUR 59 billion per year, accounting for more than half of the total budget), but also because agriculture in Serbia plays a more important role than in the average EU state. According to World Bank data, in 2016, 18.6 percent of workforce in Serbia was employed in agriculture, and agriculture, forestry, and fisheries accounted for 6.7 percent of GDP. In comparison, 4.5 percent of the EU workforce was employed in agriculture in the same year, and agriculture accounted for 1.6 percent of GDP.

The negotiations specifically target agriculture in three chapters of the *acquis communautaire*. Chapter 11 (Agriculture and Rural Development), Chapter 12 (Fisheries), and Chapter 13 (Food Safety) account for more than 40 percent of the *acquis*. They are so comprehensive that most of the changes in the agricultural and food systems are framed within the so-called Euro-Atlantic integration (*evro-atlantske integracije*) which are presented as the goal of the transition from Yugoslav socialism to independent

liberal democracy. The main avenues for modernisation of agriculture are funds administered through the Instrument for Pre-Accession for Rural Development (IPARD) and the actual legislative changes enacted through the three chapters of the *acquis*. IPARD holds the promise of EUR 175 million for Serbian agriculture. It was delayed multiple times because Serbia failed to create the institutional capacity for distributing funds, namely a functioning payment agency, but the first public call was finally launched in December 2017.

This section disaggregates these interventions as the transformation of three subjects: civil servants, producers themselves, and civil society. A governmentality understanding of intervention as affecting individual subjectivities is useful for delineating three different subjects in lieu of a "local" that would be juxtaposed to "the international"—I have been repeatedly told in interviews and read in documents that Europeanisation is mostly a matter of "mentality," which needs to change. This section also expands on this governmentality interpretation by focussing on the effects of specific policies and the wider context in which they launched. Serbian agricultural policy today exists in a state of "inbetweenness": it does not satisfy the requirements of EU policy, nor does it respond to the needs of peasants and farmers (Diković 2021, 267). While a change in mentality might be difficult to ascertain, we can trace other shifts with confidence.

Civil Servants

A general aim of Europeanisation is to improve agricultural governance, and this happens through identifying specific institutional deficiencies. Institutional deficiencies are most often tackled by nurturing new types of civil servants that would build more functional and appropriate institutions. The horror stories about the ineffective public sector are everywhere: as a member of the EU delegation in Belgrade explained, these are people who simply "don't understand" how the EU works, they populate ministries that "refuse to do their homework," and they are responsible for the slowness of European integration and the lack of progress supposed to accompany it (interview, September 29, 2016). The issue, however, is not just the lack of practical knowledge that could be explained by lack of experience in EU legislation. As my interviewee explained when talking about IPARD, the problems go beyond skill into the *will* to learn: "It is not that they [Ministry employees], ask too much [i.e., do not know enough], but that they don't ask at all, they act as if they understand everything, they refuse the help that

everyone knows they need!" Most obviously, there is a cruel deferral at play here. A GIZ employee who had previously worked with the government explained that for her, the reason for moving to this new job was not primarily monetary, but a result of the disappointment of the realisation that Serbia would not enter the EU with Croatia (interview, February 22, 2016). In this discussion of knowledge transfer and reform, let us then remember that learning about and preparing for the implementation of the CAP in Serbia—an immensely complex and demanding process—might still turn out to be in vain, as CAP rules constantly change and Serbia's advancement towards membership is constantly delayed.

While the example I use here comes from foreign partners, this image of the inefficient, incompetent, and lazy public servant is pervasive. It was repeated to me by producers to illustrate the lack of state concern for them and condemn the state's "incompetence" and "corruption" that helps some producers while neglecting others. I also heard it from NGOs who bemoan the lag in legislative changes needed to advance the EU integration process. An interlocutor summarised the feeling when commenting on the supposed participation of civil society in the EU integration process (which I come back to later in the chapter): "The Ministry will never admit that they are missing expertise, and it's mainly populated by dilettantes and incompetent people [*nesposobne osobe*]."

Two specific types of act that intervene in this problem are the twinning and TAIEX[6] programmes which seek to transform the public sector by transferring expertise from EU member states to new candidate countries and thus facilitate the *acquis* adoption. These mechanisms are celebrated as peer-to-peer (the transfer happens between experts working in the same departments) and demand-driven (host/candidate countries must request the programme) (see Füle 2013). In Serbia, agriculture, along with justice and home affairs, is the primary sector for these projects (A. Jovanović and Fitsilis 2021). And this particular act of intervention was crucial in creating the already mentioned 2004 Strategy for Agriculture.

I was denied access to training that was happening in the Ministry during my stay in Serbia, so I could not ethnographically observe these processes. However, by interviewing people who participated in them, I was allowed insight into the dynamics of the trainings. In lieu of access, the Ministry and European Integration Office provided me with detailed training reports. I was also fortunate enough that Slobodan Naumović, a Serbian anthropolo-

6. Technical Assistance and Information Exchange instrument of the European Commission.

gist, provided a very detailed account of the Agricultural Twinning Project in the Ministry—the first of its kind in Serbia. I cannot do justice to the wealth of material presented in Naumović's (2013) study, as he had firsthand access to the twinning project and the book is filled with documents and interview transcripts rarely made available. Anyone interested in the everyday politics of statebuilding and Europeanisation would find the book both fascinating and useful. Here I place Naumović's insights alongside my own observations and conversations with people who have public sector experience to add depth to the idea of transforming local subjects. This project of transformation depends on a cultural understanding of the Balkan subject, includes deep-running shifts in political rationality, and is situated within a wider landscape that demonises the public sector discursively and shrinks it economically.

Naumović's (2013) account of the twinning project (2005–2006) is filled with interview material that shows how EU partners working in Serbia draw heavily on Balkan identity as a problem to be overcome. The inability/unwillingness of staff to change and the communist legacy that has "culturally corrupted people" and "minds" are considered problems (interview with a foreign expert in the twinning programme, quoted in in Naumović 2013, 86–87). The same issues were repeated in my own interview with an EU official quoted at the start of this section, and local experts retold them as stories of insult on the receiving end.

"Identity building" also includes ideas of what it means to do politics. Within EU negotiations, the Ministry acts as the managing authority for Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance and specifically IPARD funds.[7] This means that the Ministry must decide what it needs from the EU (mostly in the form of technical assistance)[8] and then contact the EU delegation with its requests—a true effort at facilitating local ownership. However, just as it is invited to make these decisions, the Ministry is also being specifically trained in *how* to make such decisions. The educational and transformative project is obvious in official documents Naumović worked with: "Two of the most important, non-measurable but visible results of twinning are network building and *change of attitudes and behaviours*" (European Court of Auditors 2003; quoted in Naumović 2013, 59, emphasis added). This is not just giving freedom in the form of local ownership, but also shaping it in a very

7. The Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance allows candidate countries to access EU funds, and IPARD is its rural development component.

8. There are four main ways of using Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance funds: technical assistance, twinning programmes, investment projects (such as procuring equipment), and financial arrangements with other financial institutions.

particular manner. Naumović (2013, 60, 66–68, 152) sees it as "acculturation of Easterners into the legal and administrative cultures of the EU" in the service of a larger neoliberal reorientation.

In a vein similar to Naumović, Beste İşleyen (2015, 685) investigated twinning projects in Tunisia and Egypt as a form of neoliberal governmentality: a way of shaping non-economic spheres of government by economic rationalities and encouraging "governments to act like a business. Her work on state capacity building thus joins scholars who have similarly evaluated EU-civil society relations as governmental interventions (Malmvig 2014; Tagma, Kalaycioglu, and Akcali 2013). Even though TAIEX and twinning programmes remain in the domain of the state rather than civil society, the aims and acts of these interventions are remarkably similar. While seemingly empowering and facilitating the creation of "active and productive" civil servants, these techniques can be seen as a "deep-running form of governmental control over the nature of individuals, society, and governance in target states" (Kurki 2011, 351).

The idea of "governmental control," however, is complicated when engaging with the experiences of intervention. For example, even though these acts might be working to create neoliberal subjects and institutions, a simple problem arises: there are very few people actually employed on these issues within the relevant ministries. This situation is partly a result of the wider demonisation of the public sector and the ensuing cutbacks. Discourses of a faulty public sector are not found only in intervention narratives (and the policy documents that translate them to acts), but also in the public opinion. Mikuš (2016) examines this phenomenon as a moral project of public sector retrenchment in Serbia. He identifies a more general view of the public sector as "immoral" on multiple counts: too big, with salaries that are too high, and completely lacking motivation and initiative.

On the contrary, my impression of Europeanisation in agriculture was one of understaffing. In my interviews in 2016 with officials working in the Ministry, each interviewee reflected on overwork and lack of time. Here international assistance is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, international projects require inputs that entail labour time that is just "physically impossible" with current staffing (interview, March 30, 2016). On the other hand, specific bilateral help (such as the twinning programmes) in the form of people experienced in EU governance and the accession process actually "sitting in the office" is seen not only as providing useful knowledge, but adding effective labour to understaffed departments (interview, March 30, 2016).

The labour paradox of statebuilding was well summarised by an expert

employed in an international development agency: "The World Bank tells us to fire people, and the EU to hire them" (interview, February 22, 2016). Institution building in agricultural governance is shaped by a different intervention closely connected to the demonisation of the public sector—the hiring and wage freezes introduced as a structural benchmark in IMF-led efforts at "government rightsizing." Ever since the first IMF standby agreement in 2001 (and then again in 2009, 2012, 2015), the government—with public support—has worked towards public sector retrenchment (Mikuš 2016). Under these bans, Serbian civil servants work for salaries that barely cover the cost of living in Belgrade. Those who give up and leave are not replaced because of the hiring ban. Moreover, President Aleksandar Vučić, in a demonstration of economic rationality, issued a special decree that gives public servants only one euro per travelling day.[9] This is in stark tension with the fact that IPARD projects—started in 2017—need to be inspected by controllers who spend most of their time on the road and are thus left without an allowance to cover the cost of travel.[10]

In an interview with a high-level agricultural expert who participated in the Croatian negotiations, another aspect of understaffing was explained to me as "the post-negotiation exodus"—people have had enough of working in the public sector, and they have gained expertise that can be used as technical assistance to other countries on the same path (interview, September 26, 2016). While the experience in Croatia was that brain drain took place after accession to the EU, when many experts who led it (including this interviewee) moved to open private consultancies, they observed that this is already happening in Serbia. Even the EU delegation employee whom I quoted above, who expressed great frustration with the state of the Ministry, accepted that the problem was similar in all "these countries" (meaning new member states): staff are trained (to become neoliberal subjects and move governance in the same direction) but soon leave, which complicates any easy verdict on the effectiveness of this training as a form of governmental control.

Perhaps an even more dramatic movement of expertise happens in the scientific part of agricultural governance. Interviewees with significant experience of working with international projects within and beyond state offices recounted how "foreign expertise" is valued more than any local con-

9. In October 2015, the per diem allowances for civil servants were decreased from RSD 2556 to RSD 150.

10. The issue of the controllers' daily pay was brought to my attention in the interview with an anonymous member of the EU delegation. The contextualisation of the pay with the decree I owe to Bojan Elek.

tributions, and described the deteriorating quality of expertise in the era of a growing industry of consultants and international projects. A person formerly working with the government and now employed in an international development agency described the "international expertise" craze as an "additional diversion" and went as far as to describe the consultants as "plagiarisers" who, if the local officials do not already know exactly what they need, will offer them things they certainly do not need but can pay for (interview, February 22, 2016).

In an illuminating interview with a high-profile expert, I was told a selection of stories to illustrate the dire state of "expertise" upon which the accession and Europeanisation processes in agriculture are supposed to rely (interview, March 16, 2016). Efforts at knowledge transfer started in the early 2000s:

> They [foreign experts] did create an opportunity to get things done, to change things . . . because our authorities respected them . . . but this went to extreme levels: what some John or Jim or whoever would think or have to say was always at least three times more valued [*tri koplja iznad*] than whatever you say, because John and Jim have pockets full of money, and they will take people out to dinner and pay for their luxury hotels and . . . travelling here and there for work . . . and workshops. And then that outcome or output or whatever . . . when it needs to be evaluated from the Serbian side, the Serbian side will close their eyes because they have to show respect to the ambassador [of John/Jim's country] that is important for whatever.

The interviewee continued by comparing the different waves of EU accession and the expertise involved:

> Countries that joined in 2006, and you [Croatia], and let alone us [Serbia] . . . we started getting, not first class or second class [expertise], with the idea that second class will become first class based on these experiences. . . . First I thought it's third class. Now I think we got the tenth class of different consultants, experts with expertise/analyses that are . . . trust me, they are not only shallow [*površne*], but they are very questionable [*upitne*]. This whole system in which the European Agency for Reconstruction earlier and now the European Office in Belgrade function . . . those tenders and consortiums and this and that. . . . From my own field, I can name ten people that criss-crossed [*prekrstarili uzduž i poreko*] Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia,

> Bosnia, Albania, and Montenegro in the last fifteen years . . . always with the same story. When it's the meat sector at stake, here come Jim and John to Bosnia. When it's the vegetable sector in Serbia, here also come Jim and John, but this time, not through Consortium A, but through Consortium B. We have proper jokes about this—what will they be experts on now?

Here governmentalisation and projectivisation lead not only to precarity, but to a loss of expertise, and with that the loss of opportunities for self-governance. With people employed on projects, they follow project funding and have to move their expertise from "fruit to gender equality to sustainability in a matter of months, in accordance with USAID, GIZ, or FAO priorities."[11] This stands in stark contrasts with a "twenty-year career in the Ministry where your job is to track developments with smallholder production. This type of expertise does not exist anymore" (interview, March 16, 2016). There is noticeably less money and fewer donors in development policies in Serbia today, but the effects of the last twenty years of outsourcing expertise are very much felt.

While launching scathing (and often quite lively and entertaining) critiques, my interlocutors also always mentioned positive examples of international projects. These had in common a different valorisation of expertise, not appreciating it because it was "foreign," but because it came from some shared and recognisable experiences. A high-ranking land policy official reminisced about an excellent project from the late 2010s in which he cooperated with professionals from the former East Germany: he was pleased that "we wrote the law ourselves," but appreciative that "they [the GDR experts] had the same experiences, the only difference being their not having social ownership" (interview, October 11, 2016). He continued with another example from the many "study visits" civil servants go on:

> We go to places, to Denmark, and see these amazing systems and think, "We'll never be able to do this!" But, for example, we went to Portugal and they told us that they have one million hectares of land that they have no idea who the owner is! This was encouraging: we are not the only ones or the worst ones!

11. The interviewee refers to the US Agency for International Development, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

The perceived incompetence of civil servants that this section started with sits uneasily with the brain drain that is happening in Serbian public institutions and that is acknowledged even in reports of technical assistance: If everyone is slow and inefficient, how are they moving on to get jobs in the highly competitive private sector? If the aim is to build institutions, why not increase salaries and attract and retain competent people? Even though we can analyse the particular acts of intervention that aim to turn civil servants into the foundations of modern European institutions, the effects of these acts cannot be understood without looking into the wider landscape where the public sector is demonised in public discourse and assaulted by the wider projects of neoliberalisation. People are trained to develop institutions and to teach them how to practise their local ownership, thus shaping both subjects and the state that they make. However, this activation is also shaped (and frustrated) by a very material political economy of employment.

From Peasants to Farmers

New types of producers are needed to engage with these institutions. In my conversations with policymakers and experts, disparaging accounts of producers were common. For example, an FAO employee (who was previously employed in the Ministry) referred to producers as "energy vampires"—people whose complaining and demands make working with them impossible (interview, October 11, 2016). On other occasions, other former employees of the Ministry arranged interviews for me by choosing the "good examples"—farmers who they thought stood out from the backwardness that marks the average Serbian producer. Even producers themselves always differentiated themselves as "capable" from *those others* who were smaller, located in the south, older, and not able to deal with the demands of modern agriculture. As one younger producer described:

I: They don't care [*nije ih briga*] for new technologies. Totally uneducated. They will not adopt new things. It's a bit ugly to say, but they are narrow-minded [*zatucani*]. . . . And young people, who are the worst. . . . There are a lot of young people who refuse to even think.

KK: Really? I thought that young people would be more . . .

I: Oh no, here even the young are old [*Ma kakvi, ovde su i mladi stari*]. (Interview, November 11, 2016)

The young are "old" because they reside and are formed in the backward past. This wide-spread diagnosis translates into a view of modernisation and transition as transformation of the identities of the subjects themselves—turning peasants into farmers (Diković 2014). This transformation is underlined by an understanding that these subjects should be guided by economic rationalities. For example, the 2014 Strategy for Agriculture (Službeni glasnik RS 85/2014 2014, 17) refers to producers in the following terms:

> One of the most delicate issues of the future development of the agricultural sector is the especially unfavourable age and educational structure of the agricultural workforce. This problem is significant both from the aspect of the social structure of rural areas, and from the aspect of human potential capacity for adopting new technologies, changing the production structure, and many others.

Put simply—the producers are old and not educated enough to make appropriate decisions on what they will grow, and how they will use new technologies to grow it. This not only totally ignores the atrocious working conditions in agricultural labour in Serbia (see Končar 2020), but also locates the problem with producers themselves. This is not a surprising narrative.

The idea that something about the subjectivities of the producers is to blame for the lack of development in Serbian agriculture has a long history. Issues like the "lack of capitalist spirit" and the "lack of work discipline" serve as easy explanations of Serbian underdevelopment (Thiemann 2017). As already discussed, the debates within Yugoslavia similarly revolved around themes of the peasants' "irrational attachment" to their land, their "ownership mentality," and their conservative and unenterprising nature (Horvat 2016 [1976], 201). All of these were a part of the long-lasting issue referred to as "agrarian overpopulation" that first emerged with the population increases at the end of the nineteenth century (Tomasovich 1955, 158). While at first overpopulation related to the unfavourable land/peasant ratio, which could not satisfy the needs of the population, it later turned into a broader problem. The image of fast-industrialising socialist society could not tolerate a high percentage of backward peasants: they needed to move into "higher" forms of production such as cooperatives or relocate to the cities to become (self-managing) workers in the factory, the base of Yugoslav socialism. At the same time, the shrinking agricultural population had to become more efficient to support those moving to the cities (Radenković and Solar 2018).

The peasants' lack of modernity was always a problem approached by different government programmes. Today, they are encouraged into the process of "farmerisation": they should consolidate land, embrace new technologies, and develop "fundable" projects that win subsidies. Importantly, official narratives do not mention what will happen with those who do not fit this "project agriculture" (see Kovách and Kučerova 2009; 2006). This was perhaps most painfully illustrated to me in the phrase "cleansing of statistics" used by a former member of the EU negotiating team that participated in the Croatian accession. The overcrowded numbers of small farms that are too high in countries like Serbia are going to be spontaneously "cleansed" by natural death of an ageing population and the financial demise of another portion of them (interview, September 20, 2016). A Serbian expert talking about how IPARD funds are likely to be used similarly prophesied (interview, March 4, 2016):

> When this pre-accession money arrives, it will be used in Vojvodina, by a not small number of people because this sector is strong there. In Croatia, these are three to four large players and that's it, but in Serbia it's around twenty big players in Vojvodina . . . going down to, let's say, Kragujevac. Everything below Kragujevac: they can just close and lock up [*ključ u bravu*].

The producers are very much aware of this, as my interviewee told me, and it seems that the only people in denial are government officials:

> These smaller producers [*poljoprivrednici*] and these people who own land, let me say, they will . . . they will slowly disappear. That is inevitable. A lot of them cannot admit this. Even these people from the Ministry, everyone knows this.

Importantly, this topic came about when talking about the prices of land lease and the oft-discussed unreliability of subsidies in Serbia (see Bogdanov, Rodić, and Vittuari 2017, 328). A producer I interviewed found them crucial for survival of small and medium producers:

> But what is most interesting [*šta je najveća fora*], even if these small farms [*mala gazdinstva*] are given subsidies, I don't know how large subsidies, they will not survive even then. If someone works ten hectares, even if they get EUR 200 per hectare, this is EUR 2000 from the state annually. With EUR 2000, they cannot even buy fuel for the

> whole year, let alone expect some progress or betterment from this subsidy. (Interview, November 11, 2016)

While I address land explicitly in the following chapter as something that is decidedly missing from the interventions' fields of visibility, here I want to further dwell on prognoses of disappearance and some alternatives. Even though no one explicitly talks about the catastrophe that awaits small semi-subsistence farmers in the EU, there is no doubt about the difficulty and controversial consequences of transforming peasants into entrepreneurial subjects. The dairy industry in Croatia, for example, has been dramatically shrinking since Croatia joined the EU. This, however, is rarely discussed in Serbia. At the annual congress of dairy producers that I attended, this issue was mentioned in passing only once, and most of the debate related to imports and exports (fieldwork journal, October 24, 2016).

Who survives this transformation from peasants to farmers, and how? People who know how to farm and market their products must also now become literate in writing and carrying out projects, or outsource to an emerging class of private service providers. Studies in countries that implemented CAP show that CAP as a technology of government nurtures a new "farmer subjectivity": "non-local and mobile" managers rather than labourers (Kovács 2019, 1). They must learn to express their lives in numbers, calls, and project language that they are far removed from. As one of my interviewees explained, there are not many *producers* or *farmers* left when the successful ones have become *entrepreneurs* (interview, November 11, 2016). With EU funds arriving and determining success, small producers lack the time to learn to write projects, lack the funds and connections that would help them navigate state bureaucracy, and lack the finances necessary for the co-financing stipulation of these programmes.

"How much money is used" from available EU funds is a common point of discussion, as it is precisely IPARD funds that are supposed to "elevate" production to compete in EU markets. The question of using those funds then serves as critique for both the government and producers as beneficiaries of these funds: that is, the government does not provide the institutions to process the funds, and the producers lack the will and the skill to apply for them. The producers I spoke to did not have much faith that EU money would appear (be it IPARD or CAP). One summarised eloquently: "Just the paperwork will take three years! Who did the EU ever give money to? It's like, 'I'm giving you money, but God forbid you actually take it.' The whole story is not clear on what there is in it for us" (interview, October 10, 2016).

There are also different ways of mitigating the supposed lack of "capac-

ity" for absorbing the funds on the part of the producers. The, perhaps expected, step would be to delegate project-writing help to local advising services (*lokalne savetodavne službe*) whose job should be to support farmers with technological and other advice (and whose hiring practices are subject to the same hiring ban as the rest of the public sector). In reality, however, private consultancy businesses take on this role, and we are now seeing a large emerging market for project writing—this includes both stand-alone businesses (many of them started by people previously employed in state institutions) and project-writing services offered by the sellers of agricultural equipment (with the idea that the grants will be used to buy their equipment). Additionally, projects funded by EU subsidies depend on taking out loans that are later repaid (applicants provide the funds initially and are reimbursed once the project is completed). As an expert working in a development agency summarised: it is the banks that get the sweetest deal here because the loan for the initial funding gets repaid regardless of the payment of the final amount. It is "not a conspiracy theory, but a financial offer" (interview, February 22, 2016).

We see that the focus on one subjectivity—turning a peasant into a farmer—contributes to a much larger political economy. This political economy not only creates a new sector of private consultancies and loans, but also excludes small producers from participating in IPARD and other similar schemes. The arising inequalities are well recorded by both existing and aspiring EU members. In Croatia, farmers using pre-accessions funds do not consider themselves to be peasants at all, but participate in newly established material and symbolic inequalities in rural areas (Obad 2013b). In Macedonia, pre-accession funds aim "to transform not only the agricultural industry in Macedonia, but also the communities in which they exist," and the funds themselves are inaccessible to the majority of people involved in food production (Otten 2012, 4; 2015). Focussing on the experiences of people expected to "farmerise" points to a political economy with a rigid differentiation of subjects. Instead of a homogenous producer subject, some subjects are expected to disappear, many are expected to employ consultants instead of learning new skills, and a specific stratum are already entrepreneurial enough to be engaged directly.

While many policymakers suggested a differentiation between peasants and farmers in conversations and in whom they recommended that I talk to, the most literal illustration came from the same person who referred to farmers as "energy vampires." After I told him that I had spoken to some farmers' associations, he offered commiseration: it must have been *difficult*

to speak with such *difficult* people. But he also had a redemptive example: in wheat production, there is a well-functioning association, not "difficult" at all and made up of "big players." The FAO "listens to their needs" and then tries to feed them into policy through FAO projects on public-private partnerships.[12] It is these "players" that are engaged in the new political economy of projects, these farms that will apply for subsidies and get them, and these people who are the new *farmers*.

Civil Society

The peculiar situation of civil society involved in the transformation of agriculture under the EU's guidance is best demonstrated in the working of the National Convention on the European Union (NCEU). NCEU is a body "with the aim to facilitate cooperation between the National Assembly and the Civil society during the process of the EU accession negotiations" (NCEU 2017). It is structured around thematic working groups that gather civil society organisations and feed their input into EU negotiations. As already discussed in Chapter 4, this a model developed specifically to include civil society, and we can observe it within the field of agricultural governance as well. The structure imagines civil society groups commenting on screening reports and action plans that make up the body of the EU negotiation process—this is the "consultation process" between the Serbian government and civil society meant to promote local ownership of the process beyond the state. It is civil society that has ownership of the reforms as it takes on the role of watchdog and evaluator of compliance with the *acquis*.

The Agriculture and Rural Development Working Group oversees Chapters 11, 12, and 13 of the *acquis* and officially lists over ninety members. However, its operation is problematic and prevents any easy diagnosis of the "consultation process" as a governmentalising act. For example, the planned working group meeting was postponed during the whole ten months that I spent in Serbia, so I only got reports from it from interlocutors who worked to keep me in the loop after I had already departed. Miloš, who runs a small NGO that evaluates and monitors government policies in relation to agri-

12. A separate issue, brought up in the same interview, is that even these big players lack any tariff protection. While this larger context is outside of the scope of this project, it is important to point out that even the elite strata of Serbian producers still live a peripheral experience of political economy.

culture, animal welfare, and environmental protection, explained the meeting in an email where he reflected on the consultation process around the new action plan for Chapter 11:

> Imagine, even though the government of Serbia adopted the guidelines for including civil society, the National Convention, and the Serbian Chamber of Commerce, the Ministry did not publicly publish the draft of the action plan but delivered it only to NCEU with an invitation for us to send comments. The meeting held in December was only pro forma—the Ministry representatives just presented the action plan like we hadn't read it already. I left the meeting. All in all, I have no support in NCEU to try to demand that the process be transparent and inclusive, and other organisations obviously don't care either, so I have to go alone and insist on it. NCEU obviously wants a monopoly and will not insist on opening up the process, nor on respecting the guidelines. There, I'm bitterly disappointed by "my own" [people].

He continued in a follow-up email:

> Accepting the civil society suggestions is the worst that can happen to them [the government]. Until now, they have never cooperated with anyone except with a few CSOs that applauded them. And NCEU wants to monopolise [the process] because of donors. It is horrible.

The pro forma status of the meeting does not come as a surprise. I had previously attended a more general meeting of all NCEU groups in April 2016 and was faced with a similar feeling. As NCEU members explained to me in the breaks, what we are witnessing is a not a *process* (used in relation to the "consultation process"), but a *simulation of a process*. It is perhaps relevant that the same phrase was used by a scholar who is officially contracted to support the government's work on the three *acquis* chapters with agricultural economic analysis. These "simulations" allow the government to tick the boxes of civil society cooperation. Moreover, they also permit specific civil society organisations to similarly play into the game by producing pro forma reports and suggestions that use donor money but whose effects are increasingly difficult to ascertain. More than "doing nothing," the box-ticking exercise deflects any future calls for transparency and local ownership—they are already there!

These dynamics could be interpreted through the prism of a successful/

failed governmentalisation project: is a "simulation of the process" enough as a technique of government? But the infinitely more complex experiences point to different questions. While experts and NGOs referred to this as a simulation of process, civil servants spoke of long hours that keep them limited to creating the documents and analyses needed for increasingly demanding box-checking exercises. Instead of being subtly led to perform within the created boundaries of freedom, Miloš felt outright silenced by the EU-mandated process of consultation. The techniques that invite CSOs to apply for funding, embrace project life, and imagine government as a negotiation between civil society, officials, and the public are very much alive in Serbia. However, their effects are reduced to box-ticking exercises, like sending out the action plan to a select few CSOs the night before comments on a document hundreds of pages long are due, holding a meeting to note their comments without any engagement, and reporting to the EU that civil society has been consulted.

Yet EU stipulations are not without effect. They might not create "ownership" as imagined, but they do actively create a special relationship between the Serbian government and select CSOs that compete for EU funds, receive them, and reinforce civil society as an employer, which I discussed from the perspective of youth in the previous chapter. Miloš is obviously not affiliated with the large NGOs whose relationship with the state gets formalised through Europeanisation, yet his experience reveals the cracks and heterogenous effects of intervention as civil society building in Serbia.

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Policies determine the future, and they diagnose the present. The diagnoses in Serbian agriculture have for a long time depended on the producer as a backward Balkan subject. We now observe this process in discussions surrounding "farmerisation," the training of civil servants, and the development of civil society. EU intervention here does not simply "invent" the subjects that need to be transformed, but is a context-specific embodiment of a much longer process of modernisation. As already discussed, the connection between a particular diagnosis, a form of government, and the subjectivities that are targeted by it is not an invention of contemporary neoliberalism. On the contrary, the image of backwardness is situated both historically and in a more general mental map of the Balkans. Intervention is layered upon a history of reimagining subjects, and it is connected to a resilient image of backwardness.

Denaturalising these images is a process enabled by ethnographic methodologies and coeval engagement. This entails recognising the entrepreneur-

ship, creativity, resilience, and capacity needed to survive ten years of various sanctions and NATO bombing, and the economic destruction that continued well into peacetime (see Thiemann 2014). Yet it also demands that we analytically conceptualise this agency as embedded in structural conditions that connect global and local dynamics. Instead of blaming (or celebrating) subjects and the culture they are a part of, this chapter attempted to treat them as political subjects whose experiences are formed in the intersection of local and international powers.

This inquiry into experiences of EU intervention shows that practices that are supposed to target subjects—whether they are civil servants, producers, or civil society—have much wider effects than assumed in the dichotomous success/failure view of intervention. Training in the public sector fails because people quit, but this helps create the much broader field of consultancies and INGOs that employ them. Targeting civil society additionally helps this peculiar political economy: projects are well funded, and the relationship between the state and civil society is formalised. Instead of creating a liberal utopia, this formalisation further entrenches the voices of some at the expense of others. The experiences of intervention as EU accession in agriculture point to the myriad ways in which intervention not only targets subjects but creates a wider field of political economy of projects and civil society, a field structured by a politics of improvement. The neoliberal governmentality obvious in EU documents does not work as "intended" but has other, far-reaching effects. And, as the next chapter investigates, the same images of progress and backwardness reach far beyond intervention conceived as Europeanisation.

CHAPTER 6

Beyond Intervention

Land, Investment, and Resistance in Agriculture

The materiality of agriculture challenges visions of development depicted in both project documents and individual imaginaries. This struck me while I was driving and conducting an unexpected interview with a semi-subsistence producer who needed a ride from a factory where he was employed on minimum wage to his home, where he would continue working on his land (fieldwork journal, October 17, 2016). We drove through tiny Vojvodina villages, famous for their "along the road" layout and characteristic houses. As he tried to explain what he perceived as changes in Serbian agriculture, he invited me to imagine just one big field that stretches across Vojvodina and is worked by high-tech machines fed data by drones. I was in the thick of studying land consolidation efforts, diagnoses of backwardness in relation to small parcels, and the prophetic documents promising high-tech development. I laughed instinctively at the image, which I thought would satisfy those policymakers. Yet my passenger remained unsmiling: the big field means no villages, and the high-tech machinery means no people.

In this chapter, I move beyond acts, aims, and agents of intervention traditionally understood to focus on what we looked at from the car that day: land as a foundation of any policy and plan in agriculture. The previous chapter showed that the importance of EU integration as intervention in agriculture cannot be overstated: it seeks to reform mechanisms and subjects of governing and has effects that far transcend policy aims and imaginations. So it is hardly surprising that I went to Serbia thinking that I would be discussing CAP and IPARD. Attention to experiences of intervention, however, led me to pay attention to different kinds of subject-making in the field of agricultural development.

My conversations with producers and farmers' associations always pointed to land. The producers felt cheated by the changes happening in leasing regulations, they worried about there not being enough land, they bemoaned the government creating unfair competition, and they protested what they saw as injustice. The media was similarly full of discussion about land: How much agricultural land does Serbia actually have? How can thousands of hectares "disappear"? Who is leasing state-owned agricultural land, who is paying for it, and who is occupying it illegally? What is going to happen beginning September 1, 2017, when foreign citizens would be able to buy agricultural land in Serbia under Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) stipulations?[1] And who was compensated for the socially owned land that was privatised in the 1990s and 2000s? These were urgent and contested questions.

In this chapter, I pursue these questions to uncover the wider politics of improving agriculture that revolves around agricultural land use and tenure—a field formative of any agricultural policy but absent from EU negotiations. I do so through insights gained from ethnographic and relational interviews, and through a reconstruction of legislative changes to the Law on Agricultural Land and the sales that ensued from it. The chapter proceeds in three sections. The first section is a historical reconstruction that contextualises contemporary land use in Serbia within post-conflict privatisations so common in the region. The second section delves into foreign direct investment (FDI) as another form of intervention and a tool of improvement. By discussing controversial investments, the policy changes that enable them, and the narratives used for justifying them, I show that the same narratives of progress through subject transformations that we find in stories of Europeanisation are also present in the narratives of *investitori* (investors). Thus, it is not only the experiences of my interlocutors that lead beyond the fields of visibility of intervention as Europeanisation, but the wider structure in which both Europeanisation and FDI take place that commands us to think them together. Finally, the third section of the chapter brings in different forms of resistance I observed in this contentious field. I avoid an easy distinction between "bad" foreign investors and "good" local resistance, and instead uncover complex ways in which local subjects make their claims.

1. The SAA is a part of the Stabilisation and Association Process and European Neighbourhood Policy. The agreement includes specific provisions for future EU membership and details the policy harmonisation necessary. It was ratified on September 1, 2014.

Historical and Contemporary Land Use

Governing agricultural land includes governing the different ways in which it is used, leased, and sold in markets. In post-socialist countries, it is precisely private ownership of land that serves as the "basis for rebuilding the economy by way of free interaction between property owners," as it "guarantee[s] the autonomy of the individual and the existence of the liberal economy, state of law and civil society" (Siegrist and Müller 2015, 3). Land becomes the basis of peace, democracy, and market economics—it orients narratives of transition and underpins ideas of development.

Land is also an important dimension of violent conflicts: some researchers approach it as a cause, while others explore "how land becomes part of larger patterns of violent contestation" in the process of "the social production of violent conflict" (Leeuwen and Van der Haar 2016, 95; see also Kušić 2022). While local access to land most likely played a role in wartime violence, the importance of land relations in the Yugoslav wars materialised more strongly after the wars ended: in great projects of refugee return and the related ethnic engineering of newly established states (Leutloff-Grandits 2022; 2016). Material and immaterial attachments to land shaped the protracted process of return and the rebuilding of devastated areas, issues that remain relevant and unresolved to this day.

My approach to land builds on this literature and looks at it as a part of larger post-war reconstruction efforts. Despite this centrality of land and its salience for the experiences I heard about in interviews, the EU accession process treats land as a "national" question and does not regulate it beyond including it in the stipulations on the free movement of capital. In a rare engagement with the topic, for example, Sean Parramore and Jonathan Webb (2021) downplay the EU's role in the "Balkan land grab" and focus instead on "endogenous factors." One problem is that they focus exclusively on urban contexts, even though their literature comes primarily from cases of agricultural land acquisitions. But their conclusions are more generally indicative of a narrow understanding of the effects of EU policies that ignores the larger and less direct impact of the EU on land markets.[2]

This is an awkward stance: agricultural land, in terms of farm size, is the basis of CAP payments. The reliance on land within CAP is heavily criticised both as a design flaw that undermines small producers and as a site of abuse that allows local and international elites to siphon subsidies without

2. For their BiH case study, Buroj Ozone, a much more comprehensive and illuminating treatment of EU presence is provided by Mirna Pedalo (2020).

engaging in meaningful production (Gonda 2019). So even though land is central for agricultural governance—both as the target of "farmerisation" to consolidate larger pieces of land and as the basis of CAP payments—it is seemingly removed from the aims and actions of intervention. Understanding how improvement works through land requires thinking about broader local, regional, and international dynamics together.

Agricultural Land in the Yugoslav Project

Contemporary land politics needs to be understood within the relevant historical complexities—not only to access the empirical intricacies of land use, but also to highlight that land policy is always shaped by and shapes international politics and its subjects. Yugoslavia's ideological project was imprinted in land policy: in the 1960s, it was celebrated as "the most egalitarian distribution of land in the world"—a point of international pride (Horvat [1976] 2016, 90). As already mentioned in the previous chapter, the split with Stalin and the widespread peasant resistance to efforts of collectivisation led Yugoslavia to abandon collectivisation of land as its goal (Bokovoy 1998). In the reworking of Yugoslav socialism away from Stalinist ideology, the state was imagined to ultimately wither away, and thus could not take ownership of land. Post-1953 cooperative ownership was transformed into social ownership through the process of *podruštvljavanje* (socialising property), as the basis of socialist transformation. Peasants' private holdings were limited and the amount of socially owned land grew (Luković 2015). Both local politics and international positionings shaped Yugoslav land policy and its legacies.

The importance of this change cannot be overstated: other communist countries with histories of forced collectivisation embarked on a complex process of restitution in the 1990s (Dorondel 2016; Verdery 2003). Yugoslavia, on the other hand, had a much smaller percentage of state-owned land but had similarly intricate difficulties of determining who exactly owns land that was accumulated under "social" ownership. Even though the 1996 constitution once again recognised cooperative ownership (after merging it with social and state ownership in 1962), the land owned by *zadrugas* (cooperatives) was never untangled from the socially owned enterprises that used the cooperative land. When the 2006 constitution removed the category of social ownership (turning it into private ownership), the land was not returned to cooperatives, but registered under the ownership of state enterprises.

Post-war Land Politics

This set the stage for the early post-war period marked by the complex and corrupt process of privatisation. Land implicitly played a central role in negotiations with international financial institutions as it was turned into state property to facilitate privatisation. A document prepared for the EU Commission in 2006 estimates that agricultural production and food processing accounted for 25 percent of the GDP ("Country Report: Serbia" 2006, 36). This made the sector crucial for privatisation, but the ruined agricultural companies were worthless without the land attached to them. Without land, there would be no interested buyers, and without buyers, the privatisations stipulated by aid donors could not go forward. The demarcation of land was supposed to take place through the Republic Geodetic Authority, but it was referred through a personal letter that promised that the process would take place through the rewriting of the Law on Cooperatives. This did not happen until late 2016, when the FAO helped to prepare a new draft of the Law on Cooperatives.[3] Beyond issues of demarcating land, post-war privatisations are usually described as having "low legitimacy" (Zivanovic-Miljkovic and Popovic 2014, 25). The privatisations of agricultural enterprises and cooperative land were so controversial that the Anti-Corruption Council (2012; 2018) produced two special reports that detail specific sales. The added international dimension of these privatisations is not only the existence of foreign buyers, but also the fact that the Law on Privatisation was written with the help of the World Bank in 2002.

The complexity of land use in Serbia, however, does not end with land magically appearing in state ownership before sales. There is a significant amount of land whose ownership is contested. Some estimates put the value of this land at EUR 626 million (Vukotić et al. 2020). After privatisations, much of the land that was not sold continued to be used by the newly established private companies under the process commonly known as *uzurpacija* (usurpation). The state was aware of it but also knew that it could not enforce land tenure and drive forward the privatisation process at the same time. In the words of a former minister, the deal in the early 2000s was "You buy this part, and you get that part until the state figures out what it's doing" (interview, October 4, 2016).

This was also when the new Law on Agricultural Land was ratified (July 2006) and made local municipalities responsible for the lease of state-

3. I thank an anonymous interviewee for frankly describing this complex process.

owned agricultural land—a process that was supposed to happen through yearly public auctions. This was a part of a strong narrative of "farmerisation" through simultaneous privatisation of large state-owned enterprises (by leasing land that could not be sold) and consolidation. This was supposed to lead Serbian agriculture away from a "dual" form, with small semi-subsistence producers and large state enterprises, to the European form of entrepreneurial farms of thirty to fifty hectares (see Naumović 2013, 157).

Problems, however, arose when large enterprises would bid on (and win) the land they were already using but never pay for it. As other people (sometimes those originally employed in these agricultural enterprises) saw an opportunity for production and wanted to lease the land themselves, complex contestations ensued. Competing *usurpations*—between large enterprises and individual producers—would sometime include police intervention. I was told of a particular case where police would come to the land every day to note the usurpation and write a report, but they allowed production to continue nevertheless. In the end, the state legalised some usurpations in order to collect money from the lease, and rules were changed to require payment at the start, rather than the end, of the leasing period (interview, November 10, 2016). Case-based efforts at disputing leases and sales took place all around Vojvodina, and any effort to invest in land is faced with layers of different programmes of land management. This was the scene I arrived to in 2016.

Contemporary Changes

In current narratives of Europeanisation and development, land emerges in much narrower discussions than it did in the Yugoslav political imaginaries. One of these is the commonly debated problematic size of the average parcel that is too small for "efficient" market production. Development cooperation predictably focused on it from early on. Here different projects imagine building upon the Yugoslav experiences of consolidation, starting from the 1848 agrarian reform that ended serfdom and included the first consolidation efforts, to the 1970s and 1980s efforts to use consolidation to strengthen social ownership.

Competing international visions in this policy area were present from the early 2000s. One interviewee recounted a particular project: while Danish experts insisted that all consolidation should be based on voluntary efforts, German experts would say, "Forget the Danes. You already had a binding redistribution, just do it again!" (interview, October 11, 2016). A

land consolidation project was thus designed by a local land-use expert and supported by GIZ and Bavarian bilateral cooperation. It included the testing of a new IT system for leasing state-owned land, pilot projects of land consolidation and returning abandoned land to use, and assistance with the development of drafts of bylaws elaborated for the Law on Agricultural Land (see Knežević and Miletić 2018). This particular project was presented to me as one of the biggest successes of the GIZ (interview, February 22, 2016), but it was difficult to find people with experiences of consolidation. Land redistribution, whether officially voluntary or not, is always a fraught process. Land consolidation efforts might ignore the fact that scattered plots themselves could be a case of "prudent resilience" meant to make use of microclimates and protect from bad weather—if one plot gets hail, another might not (Diković 2023).

Despite all of this, consolidation processes were not the issue that captured the public imagination during my stay in Serbia. Another issue was at the forefront: the fact that the SAA signed with the EU would guarantee EU nationals the right to buy and own agricultural and forest land in Serbia beginning September 1, 2017. The issue of foreigners buying agricultural land was exaggerated by the fact that all new member states in the last rounds of EU enlargement ensured it could not happen. They all included a moratorium on the liberalisation of land markets and subsequently extended it (see Swinnen and Vranken 2010). Croatia, for example, negotiated another extension of the moratorium in June 2020, thereby delaying it until 2023. Serbia, for reasons that are unclear, did not even try to negotiate these terms. People explained it to me in different ways: some believe that the negotiating team could not imagine that Serbia would still be outside the EU in 2017 and hence did not take the date seriously; some blamed it on stupidity; others saw private benefits for people who knew they would be able to sell land acquired through privatisation. No matter what the logic was, the moratorium was not negotiated, and the requirements for the free movement of capital spelled out in Article 63, point 2 of the SAA thus came into direct confrontation with the Law on Agricultural Land from 2006, which prohibits foreign nationals from owning land.

Consequently, the discussions and demands for changing the law were framed around this problem: it was impossible to renegotiate the SAA because it would require each EU member state to ratify it again in its changed form, so the national laws had to change (see Živanović-Miljković and Popović 2014). This process was captured by civil society groups who called for changes in the law: instead of forbidding foreign nationals from owning land, which would put violate the SAA, Serbia could devise ways

of "demotivating" foreign nationals, as many European countries do—by setting, for example, a requisite number of years living near the land (see Jovanić 2013).

The problem was resolved by introducing buying conditions like those in other European countries, conditions like place of residence or registered agricultural production. The debate that unfolded around the use and sale of agricultural land provides insight into important narratives of post-war progress and development. The main themes are well captured in a publication prepared for the NCEU (the organisation of CSOs imagined to shape the EU integration process that we encountered in Chapter 5). The publication is clear that "the main goal of state institution is devising and implementing legal regulation that facilitates the development of a free market" (Strsoglavec and Vukmirović 2014, 3). Moreover, it states that the "process of EU accession is primarily a process *of changing the consciousness of citizens* who exited one system (which was socialist and to a certain extent undemocratic) and now need to learn the rules of another (which is capitalist and democratic)" (Strsoglavec and Vukmirović 2014, 9, emphasis added).

Even though the document might not have been effective in creating specific policies, it serves as an artefact that reflects the dominant narratives of agricultural transformation and land policy in Serbia. The document aims to debunk the myth that "the EU wants to destroy domestic agriculture" and effortlessly reconciles the development of small producers, implementation of CAP, liberalisation of land and food markets, and rising standards of living through market competition. Even though the mismatch between CAP and the reality of East European agriculture is a frequent discussion point (Gorton, Hubbard, and Hubbard 2009) and the possible negative effects of implied liberalisation in the Europeanisation process are known (Knezevic 2014), the document seamlessly merges disparate ideas into a vision of development through "transition" into "Europeanisation." This vision imposes a teleological coherence on opposing policies: liberalisation of trade and the well-being of small producers reconciled through the free market. The powerful erasure of the conflict innate to this vision of development shows how forcefully the ideals of Europe—which are both essential to and reproduced by international interventions—operate. In the next section, we will see how they are employed in narratives and practices of investment.

Investment as a Form of Government

A distinct but closely related form of government emerged within these debates on the Law on Agricultural Land: foreign direct investment. This

is a different intervention in Serbian agriculture that happens outside the EU accession but profoundly shapes both official politics and experiences of agricultural producers in Serbia. Within it, narratives of intervention take on a life outside their imagined fields of action. In the following, I pick apart the politics of improvement that moves alongside and through FDI in agriculture. I present the legislative changes that were made under the guise of EU adaptation, examine the familiar images of backward mindsets and outdated policies, and highlight how both local and global inequalities form the background of these changes.

The changes to the Law on Agricultural Land that were needed to accommodate the SAA stipulations were supposed to arrive with the new law in December 2015. Surprisingly, instead of alterations that would allow the law to coexist with the SAA, a new aspect of land policy was introduced: the translation of the preference for "investments" into the law (Službeni glasnik 112/2015). This was elaborated in a special directive/bylaw (*uredba*), signed by the prime minister in June 2016. It stated that each municipality could lease up to 30 percent of land under its control to an "investor" outside of the public auctions that usually regulate the lease of state-owned land (Službeni glasnik RS 56/2016). While the existing system of lease allocation through public municipal auctions was also mired in problems and corruption (see Naumović 2013, chap. 3), this was a dramatic shift. Even though another relevant change was that small producers (who own less than thirty hectares of land and have registered production for more than three years) have the right to buy up to twenty hectares of state-owned land, most commentators focused on the "investment" aspect of the change and interpreted it as opening the doors for corruption on a larger scale.

The "investor" has to apply with an investment plan, which is examined by a specially formed commission that has the power to rank applicants in the case of multiple applications. The commission is compiled from three ministries, Finance, Agriculture and Environmental Protection (later the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy), and Economy, and two other members named by the minister of agriculture and environmental protection. The first meeting of the commission was held on January 11, 2017, and the first call for investment plans was announced in February 2017 (AgroSmart 2017a; 2017b). It stipulated criteria for the investment plans: a minimum investment of EUR 500,000, a set number of jobs created, and contributions to increasing competitiveness (*konkurentnost*), to export growth, and to local government development. Also required was the location of the applicants' registration (although it was left unspecified how this detail would influence evaluations) (AgroSmart 2017b). Even with these clarifications, the law was heavily criticised for "legalising corruption"

by putting power in the hands of a small committee without clear guidelines, and thus hiding it behind an opaque evaluation process. Many people also saw it as a continuation of ongoing land grabs of agricultural land in Serbia. As we shall see, this land grab was enabled and justified by the same narratives that structure intervention projects.

FDI and Land Grabbing

In addition to legislative changes, FDI also plays a role in specific cases, both those that materialised and those that did not. Many of these purchases are cases of land grabbing. The term points to the "current explosion of large scale (trans)national commercial land transactions" that intensified after the 2008 crisis (Borras et al. 2011). News of Serbian legislative changes arrived after East Europe was recognised as another target of land grabbing, and specific cases from Serbia were included in a report by one of the most prominent NGOs working on the issue (Franco and Borras 2013). The Al Rawafed investment in Vojvodina, which I discuss below, is a commonly reported example. The term was used by my interlocutors, sometimes in ways quite different than in academic literature. Despite the limitations of the term in post-socialist settings (see Vorbrugg 2019), I use it here because the land grab frame helps us bring together narratives of legitimation, foreign investment, state capacities, and promises of development.

To understand the debates (and fears) surrounding the 2015 and 2016 legislative changes, we must travel to another important intervention in the agricultural land market that came three years earlier: the bilateral agreement with United Arab Emirates, which allowed large investments from the Emirates to bypass public tenders. The details of Emirates investments, as well as their progress, are mostly kept secret as issues of "special national importance" (Bartlett et al. 2017). These deals, predominantly found in agriculture, construction, air transport, and arms production, are concluded and "signed behind closed doors and agreed by the very top of political leadership" (Prelec 2020b, 74). While the Belgrade Waterfront project—an Emirates investment in the redevelopment of the Sava waterfront in Belgrade—received a spate of scholarly, activist, and media attention (Matković and Ivković 2018; Fagan and Ejdus 2020; Grubbauer and Čamprag 2019; M. Jovanović, Miletić, and Radovanović 2018), I want to highlight deals in agriculture that are left largely unexamined.

The first controversy to emerge from the Emirates agreement was the Al Rawafed investment in Vojvodina, which included more than ten thousand

hectares of agricultural land. About thirty-five hundred hectares were leased for thirty years from the military institution VU Morović, and the rest of the land was bought from previously socially owned enterprises Bačka, Jadran, Mladi borac, and Agrobačka (Gluščević 2016).[4] In an interview with a local official in Sivac, where AD Bačka is located, I was told (with great pride) that it was precisely the amount of land that brought Al Rawafed there: because socially owned land was turned into state property, there *was* land to be privatised. The same official saw the investment as an expression of state interest: by securing these deals, the "state turned its attention to the small village for the first time." There was a sense of victory after a long time of neglect and a closeness to the imagined modernity of urban centres. Showing me the irrigation plans, he quipped, "Just like they have Belgrade waterfront [*Beograd na vodi*], we also have Sivac waterfront [*Sivac na vodi*]" (interview, September 28, 2016).

During my fieldwork, another story of possible investment emerged, but it never came to be. The 2015 Law on Agricultural Land was passed amid rumours of Tönnies, a large German pork producer, entering the Serbian market with several farms that would need around three thousand hectares per farm (Dragojlo and Rujević 2016). Many of my interlocutors interpreted the focus on investment as a departure from a policy that had hitherto (at least superficially) tried to encourage mid-size producers to expand—not even the emerging "middle class" of producers could produce an investment plan ready for the new commission.

When I broached the topic with people who were previously involved with land contestations, they were worried but also realistic. A producer who leased land in some of the areas designated as possible investment locations told me it was just the wrong time of the year to tackle the problem: autumn is an incredibly busy period and people involved in agricultural work cannot focus on anything else during this time (a dynamic obvious to me when contacting people for interviews as well). In addition, he hoped that local "big players [*lokalni tajkuni*]" would lead the resistance to Tönnies: it was they who had the most to lose (interview, November 10, 2016).

There was little expectation of protection from the state or EU regulation. Moreover, some of the people I spoke to had contradictory understandings of what investment is. This was clear in an interview with a young

4. This ownership structure changed significantly in 2019 when Al Rawafed was bought by Elite Agro. The other Emirates investment, Al Dahra, also significantly expanded its holdings in Serbia by purchasing PKB Corporation in 2018 ("PKB" stands for Poljoprivredni kombinat Beogard [Agricultural Combine Belgrade]) (Gluščević and Katić 2019).

man who contested a big Emirates land purchase. He wondered, "What kind of investment is a silo?" In his mind, "A factory is an investment—employment, processing, abattoirs. . . . If you make an irrigation system, you get the irrigation, not me!" For him, investment meant social benefit and real responsibility, and so the deals were problematic beyond the corruption that enabled them. "They [the state] sold the 'good land' and left behind tiny scattered parcels and old buildings. If you want to be a 'big man' [*budi faca*], you should 'buy the whole company and fight for it'" (interview, October 10, 2016).

This focus on investment is crucial for understanding changes in Serbian agriculture—it does not only reorder the materiality of land on which agricultural governance happens, but it also moves alongside and within narratives of modernisation and progress that structure international intervention.[5] To understand the power of these investment discourses, it is useful to situate them within the broader discussions of the roles and effects of FDI in Serbia (and the region). In short, SNS (the ruling party) rose to power through a "narrative of economic renaissance" that relied heavily on "depicting economic salvation in the form of foreign friends coming to the rescue" (Prelec 2020a, 3). The role of "foreign friends" was first assumed by the Emirates and then shifted to China after 2016.

More than promising economic progress as an alternative to the real and perceived failures of the multi-decade statebuilding projects, these investments also have affective dimensions. Writing about capital flows to the Balkans, Miglena S. Todorova (2018, 827) argues that non-Western investments in Southeast Europe are a part of larger reconfigurations of global capitalism underpinned by "postcolonial desires for growth, wealth, and power, and postsocialist aspirations for political agency and global repositioning. Economic progress is thus indicative of a much wider desire for exerting modern political agency on an international level. It is, again, about claiming a modernity that many perceive to have been lost in the fall of Yugoslavia. These claims to modernity are visible in narratives of improvement through FDI that brings together marketisation with discourses of liberal peace and governance—issues we tackle in the following section.

5. I should note that several people I spoke with also floated the possibility that the Emirates investors were only "fronts" for the Serbian elite (often connecting it to the Vučić family). The effects of these investments—those real and those that remain mere promises—are difficult to determine. After legally requesting the information under the freedom of information right and waiting for over a year, only one investigative project obtained the information that the Al Rawafed lease has been underpaid—the state earning six times less than it would if it had continued to lease the land through public auctions (Insajder 2017b).

Legitimising FDI: Problems and Solutions of Serbian Land Use

Where does this obsession with "investment" come from? And how does it work within the wider discourses about improving Serbian agriculture? Former prime minister Vučić (president at the time of writing) was very clear on the role of FDI in Serbia: it would bring both capital and superior knowledge needed to make Serbia the "granary of Europe" (*žitnica Evrope*) that it was supposed to be. As with land deals in general, these processes include more than the transfer of tenure: there are also narratives of legitimation, subject-making, technology transfer, and industrial development policy that shape investments and their outcomes (Wolford et al. 2013).

In this section, I examine public statements to pry open narratives of legitimation used for framing FDI as a practice of government in agriculture. These narratives arrived to me not only from the media, but from the many people I spoke to who critically reflected on them—in explaining their experiences, my interlocutors used these public narratives as a defining counter-position. Their constant juxtaposition of what "they" (the media and the government) perceived as lacking and the real situation focussed on three framing devices: technological advancement, transformations of subjects, and narratives of peace and stability.

Technological advancement is the most obvious framing of the transformation of agriculture. This is how Vučić answered an MP's question about the Al Rawafed investment in July 2014:

> The Arabs will have four to five times more yields per hectare than we had—four to five times larger yields per hectare, believe it or not! I think this says enough. This will be a show case, this will be an exemplary good where you can come and see. Tell me, is there anyone among you who is not proud of how this looks today, and you will see how it will look in 2018! In one year, we will be able to fly to Chicago and New York on our planes. . . . When you look at what we managed to do . . . yields will be increased four to five times! (Nedeljnik Vreme 2014)

While these investments are always identified as "Arab" and thus racialised, they are also presented as agents of modernisation. Highlighting their belonging to modernity counters ways in which they would otherwise be racialised as less than European.[6] In this statement, modernity is painted

6. It is also significant that both journalistic and academic works scrutinise these investments in more detail than those of the EU or other Western / Global North countries. While

as high yields, and connections to the United States via flights that refer to another deal with the Emirates—the privatisation of the national airline, sold to Etihad Airways (see Bartlett et al. 2017). An investment in land is thus framed not only as improving agriculture, but as a more general path toward modernity.

This narrative also creates a firm connection between the supposedly unused land and the people who leave it as such. As a high-ranking land-use official explained: the Emirates deal was based on the fact that there are four hundred thousand hectares of unused agricultural land in Serbia. This situation is explained by the belief that "we are not capable of working the land," and logically leads to the statement, "Let's bring someone who is capable" (interview, October 11, 2016). But the problem is that unused land is in the mountainous south, not in Vojvodina, where these deals are made. As a producer explained when I asked him about public perception of fallow land: "If you find ten hectares of unused land in Vojvodina, show it to me and you can get that and my twenty hectares immediately" (interview, October 10, 2016).

The prime minister thus presents many investments as a more general change in both individuals and society, connecting ideas of under-utilising land, the transformation of subjects needed to use it, and wider societal evolution. For example, after a visit to the Tönnies headquarters, a company considered by many to be the main reason for the changes in the 2015 law, the prime minister spoke about how he expects even just the *presence* of Tönnies in Serbia to "change the culture of doing business" (Politika 2016). The reference to "changing culture" is similar to the discussions of the Twinning Project in the Ministry discussed in the previous chapter. This framing is in line with the usual discourse of the Serbian people, or the Balkans in general, as not doing enough, not being hard working enough, and generally in need of "learning" how to "really work." In relation to Tönnies, the prime minister explained that the aim is to learn "how the Germans do it, how they do it in the cleanliest possible way, in the best way, and why they are the most successful in Europe" (Vučić 2016).

The sentiment is captured well in a speech at an opening of a different German factory (this time not agricultural), where Vučić said that Serbian development depends on "winning against laziness, shallowness,

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I do not explore racialisation further because my interviewees framed their resistance against the state and other local elites, the racialised framing of FDI in a changing global political economy remains an issue that deserves more attention. I would like to thank Kerem Nisancioglu for bringing this to my attention as a discussant on a panel at BISA 2018.

and . . . incivility [*neučtivosti*]" (Vučić 2017). The cooperation between the government and foreign investors, "our dear friends" in the prime minister's terminology, would bring about the behavioural change needed in the workforce: Serbians will be more hard-working and more civil. In this narrative, FDI means action and accepting responsibility—only such an approach can deal with Serbian laziness, shallowness, and incivility. In short, while the surface of FDI might be monetary and material, its effects are supposed to reach deep within individual subjectivities and the cultures made by them.

The same speech also taps into narratives of "peace and stability" in the region. The narrative changes from deprecating the Serbian workforce by contrasting it to everything it will learn from its "German friends," to speaking to the investors themselves and celebrating the workers' ability as the main "engine pulling Serbia along the road of progress." Here, the prime minister employs concepts of peace and stability, thus drawing upon the narratives of risk but localising them to use the ready-made image of the violent and war-prone Balkan subject:

> It is important that we preserve stability. And the choice between stability and instability is made every day. We live in a region where if you look away for just a moment, the whole train can slip from the tracks. Every action is sensitive, every decision has long-term consequences. This is why I want to say that stability is something that we need to work on together. So I ask you, the workers, and everyone else, to help us do so. Arrogance doesn't lead anywhere. (Vučić 2017)

The speech also includes an invitation to "his dear friends in Germany" to encourage more of their own friends from Germany to invest in Serbia:

> I invite them to come and see how hard working the Serbian people are and how well we can work—that we always have a clear message that we want peace, that we want stability, that we want to work, and that we want more investments. As the president of the government, I guarantee that nowhere, in none of the surrounding countries, can you find the conditions that you find in Serbia. (Vučić 2017)

More than a very literal illustration of the developmental race to the bottom, this speech illustrates that FDI is not legitimised only through quantitative economic calculations, but relies on the link between forms of government and the subjects produced by them. It employs a governmental reason when

it creates the link between personal self-improvement, neoliberalisation of working conditions, and national progress.

The people whose transformation is imagined—the workers—are not imagined to be empowered by market rationalities but contained in underpaid jobs. They would be "arrogant" to expect or demand more. While the narrative of progress is often invested in utopian liberalism, Vučić here hints at the heterogeneity and inequality that form its background: this is not productive power telling people to strive for more, but a power that determines the level of hope that each individual is entitled to—with future workers in FDI projects not being entitled to much of it.

What Makes Resistance?

FDI in agriculture is always discussed in relation to the land needed, and the people I spoke to made it clear that the government of land is debated, refuted, and even violently asserted. In this section, as in Chapter 4, I turn to resistance as crucial for understanding forms of rule and use it to point to the multiplicity of Balkan subjects, and the manifold ways in which they are engaged by narratives of progress and modernisation. At the same time, I stay away from seeing it as an expression of local authenticity or as a something exterior to power.

I also build on the literature that complicates the simplifying understanding of resistance to land grabbing as always coming from smallholders (Mamonova 2015). As land grabbing is increasingly recognised as an ongoing issue of post-conflict reconstruction and a part of the "liberal peace package," a more nuanced understanding of these processes is crucial (Millar 2016a; Kušić 2022). Movements against land grabbing globally usually centre on the notion of food sovereignty, "a collective right of peoples to produce their own food in their own territory" (Dunford 2015, 1). Accordingly, the resistance we imagine will contest land deals is still limited to romanticised understandings of "small producers" (see Mandacı and Tutan 2018). While such an interpretation is important in political activism against land grabbing, uncritically reproducing it in academic literature hinders our understanding of the subjects involved in these dynamics (Mamonova 2015). While there were initiatives for coalition building around food sovereignty in Serbia,[7] ideological coherence and a strong movement are lack-

7. For a more recent take on issues of food sovereignty in Serbia, see the publication by

ing. In June 2012, Freedom Fight (Pokret za slobodu) organised a meeting with representatives of Via Campesina (see Srećković and Bogićević 2013). Most of the people involved were active in politics when I arrived in Serbia, but none of them attended the European Via Campesina meeting that I attended with Serbian participants in October 2016. Instead, I encountered loud and varied contestation.

In this section, I delve deeper into complex positionalities through three encounters with people contending the changes in agricultural land use: policy experts, producers, and party members. But before moving onto specific encounters, it is important to note that much of the critique of land policy has been appropriated by far-right groups who argue that the government is ceding sovereignty by not retaining landownership within national citizenship boundaries. This is a part of a broader merger of "green" sensibilities with radical-right politics visible across Europe (Lubarda 2020; Alarcón Ferrari 2020). Diverse populist policies and narratives "are specifically articulated to operate in rural settings through offering nationalistic and exclusionary discursive responses to land questions" (Alarcón Ferrari 2020, 834–35). In Serbia, such answers to ongoing land questions are present in the media, but also in the parliament in parties like Dveri that bring together the "usual" anti-GMO and small-holding oriented policies with right-wing, exclusionary politics.[8]

These parties also make the return to cooperatives and *zadruge* a key part of their programme.[9] The long history of *zadruge* is ever-present, as an MP from Vojvodina summarised: "*Zadruge* are what brought progress to this part of the world. Up to the twentieth century, people slept on the floor, and when *zadruge* came, they slept in beds" (interview, October 11, 2016). These efforts to revive cooperatives overlap with the larger movement of the owners of old social and state cooperatives who argue that the sale of land is illegal because it violates their rights to private property. Interestingly, these associations were not the subject of any of the vast civil society building in the country despite their size and relevance for rural areas. For example, the Association of Small Shareholders of Vojvodina (Udruženje malih akcionara Vojvodine) represents about fifty thousand people who used to have shares

AMA Centar (S. Petrović 2019). For a reflection on some limitations of the food sovereignty movement in post-socialist Europe, see Hajdu and Mamonova 2020 on Romania, Visser et al. 2015 on Russia, and Mamonova 2018 on Ukraine.

8. For more on Dveri, see Jovanović 2018.

9. See their website: https://dveri.rs/zasto-dveri/program/povratak-selu-i-poljoprivredi/ (accessed June 20, 2020).

in big state enterprises that sold by the state in the process of privatisation. In a nutshell, they contest the distribution of land in the transition period when socially owned land became state owned and then privatised. Their argument is that social ownership implies private ownership as well; thus the privatisation process is criticised as alienating their *private* property—a narrative that differs greatly from the food sovereignty critique that focuses on collective rights and alternative forms of tenure.

While I do not go into the details of these logics of resistance, these movements complicate the usual narratives of resistance—these are the "in-country critiques" that are often celebrated as sources for alternative political imaginaries in processes of countering Eurocentric erasures (see Rutazibwa 2019). The insistence of the cooperative associations on their rights as holders of private property sits uneasily with the stories of romantic local Yugoslav social ownership against capitalist expansion and private ownership. The radical-right groups here employ much of the anti-imperialist rhetoric employed by the global Left. So instead of trying to categorise, condemn, or celebrate, I inquire about these positionings through three encounters. These encounters show that free market narratives have complex grounded lives, and they point to ways in which resistance to one form of power can reproduce other hierarchies. With them I argue that how, why, and when people act cannot be understood within the confining label of "the local."

Resisting FDI in Offices

Some of the people who designed the 2006 Law on Agricultural Land now work in a consultant firm based in Belgrade and service clients all over the world. When I met them, they were finishing an analysis for a company considering investment in Mozambique, and they were getting ready to travel to Georgia as part of an expert team providing the same assistance along the path of "transition" that Serbia received before getting EU candidate country status. At the end of my meeting with Mladen, who designed the 2006 law around his "faith in the free market," I was taken aback by his advice about the direction my study should take. Once I had made it clear that I planned on researching the current transformations in landownership, he brought up *land grabbing* (used in English) as a concept I should rely on.

Mladen definitely did not belong to the transnational Left, like the organisations who published the biggest reports on land grabbing, nor did he champion smallholders as heroes of the usual stories of resistance to land grabbing do (see Srećković 2013). Shortly before mentioning land grabbing,

he had recommended that I read *The Great Rebirth: Lessons from the Victory of Capitalism over Communism* (Åslund and Djankov 2014). The book had just been translated by the Belgrade Libertarian Club; it argues that the most successful transitions were led by "bold" privatisations and deregulation—precisely the things that the literature and social movements blame for causing the land rush in the first place. Critics of land grabbing accuse the free market of commodifying land (both in the market, but also more literally by creating cadastres, registering tenure, and delineating parcels) and thus setting the stage for the contemporary land rush. Mladen and his colleagues, on the other hand, see the same practices as protecting tenure and thus the free market, and they imagine a well-functioning market as a defence against land grabbing.

Mladen also told me about his own work as a consultant. The analysis for the investment client in Mozambique he had just finished was more comprehensive and cheaper than anything available internationally. It was clearly a great source of pride, but it also struck me as idiosyncratic—these analyses are used to identify so-called yield gaps, the difference between the potential production of land and its current output. These yield gaps effectively create *the object* of investment as development: once an area is identified as underutilised, investors move in to buy land and exploit its full potential. As in Serbia, such investments are legitimised by narratives of "backwardness" to be redeemed by (foreign) capital. So, while condemning the changes in Serbian land policy as land grabbing, Mladen was proud of his part in facilitating another, probably much larger, land grab in Mozambique.

Two things come out of Mladen's story that are recognisable in other forms of resistance against land grabs in Serbia. First, the free market here is not a foreign import of global neoliberalism, but a localised narrative with emotional attachment that cannot be downplayed as "delusional" or as "buying into" global narratives. Second, this faith in the free market and its materiality (which makes Serbian experts more "affordable" than their Western counterparts) points to Serbia's complex global position: one can rally against a land grab in Serbia while working to enable another one in Mozambique.

Resisting FDI in the Fields

The resistance to these deals that emerged in the fields was varied because attachments to land are varied. FDI participates in a broader affective realm in which ownership, hard work, and dignity form the basis of rural ethical

life (Diković 2021, 274–75). An official reflected on similar issues when asked about an Emirates company expanding orchards in Vojvodina. He confirmed my reports that the company was trying to buy more land, but noted that it faces a situation in which "people don't look at land only economically." Land is both "heritage" and a "social security network": "If it fed [*prehranila*] my grandad and my father, I guess it will me as well. If you lose a job or can't finish university, the land will be there waiting for you" (interview, October 11, 2016).

Within these multidimensional attachments, we also see important differences and varying strategies. The second story of resistance I want to retell is that of Milenko: he had previously leased some of the land that Al Rawafed leased under the bilateral agreement with the Emirates, and his family is rich enough to have tried to buy the two thousand hectares that were sold to Al Rawafed. His story is one of a "good" mid-sized farmer, and he led the resistance to the Al Rawafed acquisition. The story highlights the crucial question of who has the power to resist, and what voices we are resurrecting when we seek to engage local subjectivities.

Milenko is well connected with the state government in Belgrade and the provincial government in Novi Sad, so he received a map with the location of all land parcels that were designated for the acquisition even before the news was public. He mobilised eighty-four people who were then leasing that land. From speaking to other people involved in smaller and less publicised instances of resistance to investments, I learned that this was normal practice: those who have the most to lose, the big producers, invite (or order) smaller producers to join the protest and thus give it legitimacy. They met and signed a contract of "collective responsibility" that was supposed to protect them from individual persecution. However, the State Information Agency (Bezbedonosno-informativna agencija) began inviting people for interviews, and people slowly removed themselves from the collective. Forty people remained, and they were "handled" by the local police for "working against the interests of the state." Milenko dealt with this more easily than the rest of the group because his social capital in the area made local police more "manageable," and his group continued to protest. However, Al Rawafed representatives soon offered these people the opportunity to work the land for them, since they faced delays in getting machinery into Serbia. Milenko was furious. He told everyone that they were crazy for accepting a deal that would help them through the year but leave them without land to lease in the future.

After the Al Rawafed deal, only ten people remained in the group of protestors. With support dwindling and the pressures from the State Infor-

mation Agency persisting, Milenko himself started working for Al Rawafed, which other participants saw as a betrayal. By conceding the investment, Milenko was made to construct another narrative that would preserve the coherence of his first protesting Al Rawafed and then working for it. He seemed to be happy with the cooperation since he was still working on a part of the land, but the conversation I had with him, or the fact that he agreed to meet and narrate the story in great detail, shows that he still felt resentment he wanted to share. Throughout the interview, he threw numbers at me that proved that the promise of a "fivefold increase in yields" (which state officials used to justify the investment) did not happen.[10] The project was legitimised by a reference to the backwardness of Serbian agriculture, and Milenko worked hard to prove to the world, myself included, that this is unjustified.

He still retold the story as one of insult, rather than opportunity: in a mix of anger and pride, he told me that even though he is now responsible for only seven hundred hectares of wheat for Al Rawafed (since it has its own equipment), that first year he had finished all eighty-five hundred hectares in *only* fifty-four days—not even the most advanced farmers in Europe could do it that quickly! Milenko knew that his accepting the deal angered and surprised people, but his own explanation put the blame elsewhere: "I was not fighting with the Arabs. I blame and I was hurt by my state!" He continued:

> The chief agronomist [of Al Rawafed] comes to me to talk about growing—he is from Israel and does not know everything about the climate here. How is it possible, then, that they "had to come" because we were not capable of working the land? We were very much capable. Just let us do it!

Farmers *like him* are not backward—they can compete, they can use the same agro-industrial techniques, but they need to be recognised by the state as being able to do so. The fact that Milenko blamed the state specifically, rather than Al Rawafed, shows an expectation of and reliance on the state, even in free markets. Space prevents a more detailed discussion of the role of the state in these narratives, but it is worth mentioning that an expectation of the state as a provider persists despite the negative connotations of both "state" and "politics" (see Mikuš and Dokić 2016; Jansen 2015, Jovanović

10. This refers to promises of yield increases made by Vučić in a parliamentary debate on the topic of Emirates investments in Serbia (Nedeljnik Vreme 2014).

2021, Rajković 2017, Simić 2018). But this contradiction in this case also has an international dimension: Milenko was construed as backward in narratives of Europeanisation coming from outside of Serbia, and was implicitly cast as needing development by the Serbian state itself.

Milenko also had a specific vision of development that Al Rawafed did not fit within. He told me a story of the village "coming back to life" in the last decade as producers were able to expand. He emphasised that his own success was nothing without the success of the village—he might be able to afford football lessons for his son, but what if his son must travel to Novi Sad or Belgrade to play because he has no playmates left in the village? A similar view was brought up by an official in Belgrade: it would be one thing if people from Denmark, for example, bought twenty hectares and moved into a village; this would be good. The village would see a new way of living and learn new techniques for working the land, and it would help it grow and develop. But from these investments, the only thing that happens was that the price of land increased to levels that local producers cannot keep up with (interview, October 11, 2016).

At the end of our conversation, I asked Milenko how much money he lost when Al Rawafed came to his village. We had spent the last two hours talking about the deal, and he was visibly upset, so I assumed it was a large sum. He looked at me reluctantly: "To be honest, I didn't lose much, I just squeezed out the really small ones [producers who leased smaller plots in state ownership]." Milenko was concerned with proving himself as a subject capable of functioning in the free market. He clearly placed himself on the right side of the civilisational dualism that posits the ability to compete in the free (global) market as a characteristic of modernity, but it is his own state that had refused him the recognition. He posited his ability to work *as hard* and *as well* as foreign and modern farmers as a defence against land acquisitions. In this common-sense defence, he simultaneously rendered those who did not have the newest technology and corresponding yields as open targets for those same land acquisitions. Thus, the image of backwardness not only justifies intervention, but also naturalises both old and new inequalities.

Instead of showing incoherence in Milenko's view of development, the story points to the silences in the teleological narratives of agriculture we are offered: if we are determined to develop a "middle class" of producers, where do the smaller ones go?[11] This question, and the division between the "small"

11. While I heard rumours of raising lease prices, the focus of my fieldwork on articulated resistance meant that I did not investigate the effects of these changes on producers more broadly. A more traditional ethnography, as opposed to the multi-sited political ethnography

and the "big," is central to understanding both EU and FAO projects, as well as FDI. This division *between* targets of interventions forms the basis of Milenko's story and is uncovered when we follow the experiences of the targets of intervention.

Resisting FDI in Party Politics

While I might have been surprised by talking to farmers and encountering their instrumentalisation of the free market narrative, I was less surprised to hear it in "Dosta je bilo" (DJB—It's Enough!): a technocratic, libertarian party that entered the parliament in 2016. DJB loudly opposed the new Law on Agricultural Land from the beginning, and openly described it as "encouraging land grabbing" as early as September 2015 (Kozić 2015). Hoping to find out more, I arranged a meeting with Sanja, a prominent party member.

When Sanja was introducing me to the concept of land grabbing, she emphasised that this concept was not commonly mentioned in her region. Instead, it was reserved for "black countries" (*crnačke zemlje*). She was of course referring to the African countries where the largest land grabs happen, and Serbia is "definitely not one of them." This reference to a racial binary between European and "black" countries took me by surprise because most hesitate to make this distinction explicit, but its implications reach farther than everyday racism. It showcases the disparity between geographies in which Serbia is located in Europe and development indicators that put it firmly on the side of needing FDI. Sanja is strongly attached to the dream of belonging to Europe—preserving that attachment when faced with exclusion from the EU and processes similar to those in the Global South requires a complex process of negotiation.

While Sanja's racial depiction of this dividing line was startling, throughout my fieldwork I was faced with similar cartographies. In lectures, presenters would demonstrate the severity of (weak) development indicators by stating that they resembled Senegal or Mozambique—countries that Serbia, it is implied, should not be associated with. When explaining the "migrant crisis" along the Balkan route, which dominated public discussions in 2016 and 2017, people drew distinct lines between "us" as white, Christian refugees, and "them" as non-white, Islamic subjects.

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pursued here, might correct this omission and bring to fore the everyday effects of these policies on small-scale and (semi-)subsistence farmers.

This political subjectivity is at the same time considered a part of Europe, unlike its black/underdeveloped/non-Christian outside, *and* as needing its help, knowledge, and guidance to become or return to this fully European status. These are instances of everyday geopolitical positioning (see Chapter 4). Just as Milenko differentiated between himself, who *deserved* land, and those *smaller ones* who could be allowed to be squeezed out of the land market, Sanja divided the world into those open to land grabs and those who should be protected from them. Importantly, these images were not presented to me through stereotyping foreigners or just through self-exoticising locals—they were everywhere, and they underlined policies, behaviours, and wildly varying narratives. While I sought to engage with local subjects on their experiences of intervention, I was faced with a much more complex idea of the local subject that cannot be fully appreciated without considering its place in global imaginaries.

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This chapter turned to another field that makes the lived reality of agricultural government in Serbia. By investigating land use, how it is imagined, which subjects populate it, and the experiences of those contesting its changes, the chapter demonstrated the radical openings that are brought about by a methodological and analytical focus on the subjectivities of the targets. Expanding our view beyond intervention understood as EU-led peacebuilding and statebuilding helps us to see the wider politics of improvement that unfold within and around it. We examined the lives of CAP-fitted agricultural production beyond intervention, and ways in which its ideals are employed by the Serbian state and local elites to narrate a road to progress through land investment. The discourses of good governance, transparency, peace, and stability are plucked from global narratives and actively put to work in very specific contexts. The images of underdeveloped peasants, backward technologies, and the need for subjective transformations are as local as they are international.

When thinking about the targeting of producers—whether by EU projects or investment laws—I was continuously faced with firmly drawn division lines. The narratives of empowerment, activation, and entrepreneurship move alongside storylines of death, disappearance, and silence. It is widely understood that there will be those who will fail in this transformation. In official narratives, the disaster is hidden in Europeanisation terms like "natural death," "consolidation," and "cleansing statistics." For many small producers, erasure is barely avoided by labour on land they previously leased themselves. As with EU projects that seek to activate specific subjects while

relegating others to financial ruin, narratives of FDI also depend on dividing lines between big and small, developed and underdeveloped.

An intricate negotiation of subjectivity takes place when individuals are tasked with living the everyday of global (and European) inequality. How does Mladen remain so emotionally attached to land in Vojvodina while at the same time facilitating a land grab in Mozambique? How does Milenko expect his village to develop when he compensates himself for the land lost to Al Rawafed by taking land from smaller producers? How does Sanja preserve the distinction between "us" in Europe and "them" in the Global South even though Serbia has land-grabbing experiences parallel to those in the Global South, and is continually excluded from "Europe proper"? They are all navigating a politics of improvement that propels them along the path of progress and modernisation beyond the narrow confines of intervention, Europeanisation, or development. It is precisely this politics of improvement that I address in the conclusion chapter that follows.

This chapter destabilised the categories that orient research on interventions. In search of the "grassroots" and "local," we are faced with a more complex class stratification of Serbian producers. While expecting a "global" land rush, we are faced with the state assuming the key role in enabling FDI. In efforts to learn from the analysis of targets of intervention, we are faced with "casual" racism that draws the lines between people worthy of keeping their land and those not developed enough to warrant protection. In short, the frames and programmes used in the government of both agriculture and land in Serbia show that governmental ideals and hierarchies are very much alive around the world, but they are often employed internally, within Serbia and within specific communities. Intervention here becomes a limiting frame, as the politics of improvement unfolds in a wider field.

Conclusion

From Intervention to a Politics of Improvement

The aim of this book has been to think with and from experiences of intervention usually not present in intervention scholarship. My goals were moral, political, and analytical. Feminist and post-colonial scholarship first turned to the experiences of women and colonial domination with humanist aims of creating a space for stories and agencies hitherto absent (Bhambra 2007, 28; Prakash 1994; Sabaratnam 2017, 43; Smith 1997). This was, and still is, a moral project with political hopes: restoring these stories can help us understand specific positions and forms of power, and work towards changing them. Similarly, many people involved in interventions today—whether they are practitioners, experts, or scholars—instinctively understand that the knowledge and experiences of those intervened upon must be included in designing, implementing, and evaluating the many schemes launched in the name of progress.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these political investments are easily accused of bypassing scientific inquiry and pursuing "normative humanism" and "identity politics" (Go 2016, x, 143). Moreover, in the current mood that valorises difference, a move towards exploring diverse places and people can be underpinned by voyeuristic and performative desires. Parallel and often in response to these critiques, a tremendous amount of work has been done to show that turning to these perspectives is not just a political act, but also "epistemically generative" (Sabaratnam 2017, 50). As Julian Go puts it, "One begins from the standpoint but ends up with much more" (2016, 159).

"Much more" here means a better understanding of the phenomenon with which we started: whether that is colonialism, capitalism, or intervention. Post-colonial scholars have changed how colonialism is understood,

providing "a more adequate appreciation of the global context of modernity" (Shilliam 2010b, 24). Feminist IR has demonstrated that without the experiences of women we cannot understand nationalism, political economy, or diplomacy (Enloe 2014). Intervention scholars have offered new structural explanations of intervention and uncovered the many hierarchies and power relations within them (Sabaratnam 2017; Turner and Kühn 2017). This book has similarly opened the process of intervention as governmentalisation to scrutiny. I examined some of the complexity that hides within "the local," drew out the historical context of images that inspire and justify interventions, and pointed to multiple ways in which governmental techniques are blocked and redirected.

But the "much more" we are led to can also extend the limits of our existent questions. This book delved into the wider contexts in which interventions are launched and operate. Talking and thinking with many young people involved in non-formal youth education uncovered the importance of different programmes that target unemployment in Serbia and their embroilment in hierarchies of Europeanness. In agriculture, the same approach pointed to land and foreign direct investment as important structural drivers within and alongside Europeanisation. Importantly, focussing more on the reception, rather than the intent, of governing highlighted how different subjects conceptualise political action alongside intervention.

More than adding empirical detail, this material challenges the epistemic framework of international intervention that scholars within and outside IR habitually operate with. A change of perspective—from interveners to those intervened upon—leads to a series of disruptions. They emerge from lived experience and challenge "prior categories and assumptions, exposing uncharted territory where familiar categories don't hold" (Li 2014, 5). Much has been said about the importance of such surprises in ethnographic work (Cohn 2006; Fujii 2015; Kurowska and Bliesemann de Guevara 2020; Philipsen 2020; Wilkinson 2015). While I share with this literature a commitment to this, often elusive, part of fieldwork that simultaneously inspires and intimidates, here I make disruptions crucial for challenging the framework of intervention and ways we conceptualise its agents, acts, and aims.

Whether optimistically seen as projects that build peace, democracy, and development around the world, or condemned as imperialist undertakings in disguise, interventions are understood as large-scale transformations of citizens, societies, and states. In the effort to understand them, practitioners and scholars alike have broken down these large projects into smaller units that can be "managed." While scholars are highly critical of expert practitioners who travel around the world delivering de-contextualised, seemingly

universal knowledge on a particular aspect of intervention, we simultaneously remain wedded to the idea that, unlike them, we *can* study a narrowly defined intervention.

By looking at what is manageable, both practitioners and scholars of intervention can lose sight of everything else. It is by ignoring the outside of intervention that we can talk about agricultural policy without talking about land; that we can talk about market liberalisation but not wonder what will happen with thousands of semi-subsistence producers in new EU member states; that we can talk about migration as a solution to economic problems without accounting for its human cost. Turning away from the complexity of what remains out of sight allows us to convince ourselves in our prescriptive authority of knowing what is good for others.[1] Like experts who would benefit from thinking more broadly and contextually even when it takes away from their power to prescribe, scholars might benefit from pursuing the concerns of their interlocutors beyond the concepts that underpin their research. This would not mean taking those concerns and interpretations for granted, nor would it imply letting go of our critical orientations. It would mean engaging a wider variety of issues than our concepts are comfortable with.

One way of formulating this project is to highlight the importance of different casings (Soss 2021, see also introduction and Chapter 1). My fieldwork led me to ask: Are the experiences I encountered really best approached as cases of intervention? What does calling them "intervention" allow me to see, what does it move out of view? Such engagement meant staying open to the idea that intervention—understood as civil society building through non-formal education (NFE) or Europeanisation of agriculture—might not be the crux of the issue, even if it was intervention that originally brought me to Serbia.

In this conclusion, I follow the consequences of engaging subjects who are intervened upon along two paths. In the first section, I argue that the concept of international intervention is fundamentally unable to engage the experiences of people living in spaces of intervention as coeval political subjects. Instead, I propose that we conceptually reorient our research around a politics of improvement. In the second and final section, I position this reorientation within the larger project of provincialising, globalising, and democratising IR and knowledge production more generally. I suggest that a different conception of subjects in our research entails a different approach to critique, and to "Europe" itself.

1. I borrow the formulation of "knowing what is good for others" from Inayatullah (2014).

From Intervention to a Politics of Improvement

The processes that I observed—and that many of those working to centre the experiences of those intervened upon are likely to come across—cannot be understood within the concept of intervention, but are better analysed as a politics of improvement. By using the word "improvement," I am in no way making a statement about the motives behind the practices I explore. Nor am I trying to judge their results in order to decide whether measurable improvement is the outcome of any specific intervention or larger programme. As the previous chapters have shown, intervention projects create opportunities for some while limiting possibilities for others. Instead, the concept allows tracing different programmes that are presented as improvement. These programmes are not united by a definition of actors or a delimitation of fields of action, but a teleological understanding of progress and the belief in human agency's ability to facilitate this progression. Tania Li's (2007) work on development is inspiring here. A view of improvement as a logic of government opens up the space for seeing international intervention as one of many simultaneously operating "improvement schemes"—programmes that are guided by an undying "will to improve" the lives of populations, and which are a constant, if ever-changing, feature of political, social, economic, and ecological life (Li 2007).

I intentionally chose quite different policy sites: non-formal youth education is embedded in the Serbian NGO scene and civil society, and agricultural governance is a relatively "dry" exercise of technical state policy. Given this difference, I was struck by their similarities. The first, perhaps less surprising commonality, lies in the entwinement of material and representational hierarchies. Both interveners and those intervened upon make sense of the past, present, and future using well-established images of backwardness and civilisational progress. But these images operate within a very material inequality, on both domestic and international levels. Making sense of the role of NFE in civil society, or the ways in which agriculture is expected to develop, thus requires bringing together cultural/subjective and economic/structural analyses that are still too often kept separate.

The second commonality lies in my observations of the limiting nature of intervention in the process of coeval engagement. My departure from the frames of intervention when starting to think about the (un)employment of NFE participants could be attributed to the limits of the programmes I participated in or to a faulty research design. But the salience of land politics—both in my interviews and in public discussions—similarly does not fit within the parameters of intervention. Importantly, this realisation

also pointed to the limits of my methodological design: looking into the politics of unemployment brought into view young people preparing for migration and vocational education; people who were not a part of my study, but needed to be brought in by a wider engagement with local media and scholarship. The connecting thread is improvement, as a form of government that depends on and creates symbolic and material inequalities, and as a process that operates through and beyond peacebuilding and statebuilding interventions.

Improvement as an organising principle of political, economic, and social life is not reserved for spaces of intervention, the non-West or the Global South. Its reach is global, yet unequal and always heterogenous. Keeping in mind this reach counters the tendency to imagine (post-)conflict spaces as somehow outside of time and instead includes them in theorising coeval political life. Politics of improvement can serve as a tool in the project of conceptualising targets of intervention as coeval political subjects—not only in statebuilding and peacebuilding, but international political and social life more generally.

Thinking about Improvement Historically

The notion of the politics of improvement purported here builds on an inter-disciplinary literature that sees improvement as a central aspect of the emergence of liberalism—from its inception in colonial expansion to its contemporary forms that continuously transform lives around the world. By highlighting this continuity, I hope to demonstrate the usefulness of the politics of improvement as a conceptual lens. It is important to note that I do not present it as a "better" version of intervention, but as a productive connecting thread that allows us to see continuities and disjunctures in forms of government that depend on hierarchy and go beyond any specific intervention. I present the politics of improvement as a lens that brings wider experiences of being improved into discussions of interventions. While a complete genealogy of improvement is not my aim here (see Allan 2018; Bhandar 2018; Ranganathan 2018), a short detour to its historical emergence in discussions of land, ownership, and colonial conquest is necessary to highlight its centrality for the way we conceptualise political subjects. Improvement depends on a denial of coevalness, and inquiring into its politics allows us to see the effects of this denial—in both political practice and scholarship around it.

Brenna Bhandar presents improvement as a key logic that connects laws

of property with "language, ways of seeing, and modes of subjectivity" that render subjects "outside history" (2018, 3). Bhandar shows how, after first appearing in William Petty's efforts to survey and quantify the land and populations of Ireland, improvement was naturalised in the thought of John Locke and William Blackstone, who cast it in civilisational terms. Not only did ownership of land come from the labour that improved it, but people inhabiting the land were judged based on their proximity to this improvement-based relation to land. In other words, a civilisational chasm appeared between "those who were not productive" and the "industrious cultivators," found among the colonisers and enclosers, who were guided by improvement in both ethos and action (Bhandar 2018, 47–48).

While the colonial foundations (and their modern implications) of Locke's thought are thoroughly and often discussed, Bhandar's work is especially useful in connecting it to the problem of allochronism, or denial of coevalness, that we started with in Chapter 1. Allochronism plays a key role not only in intervention, as we discussed, but also in this history of improvement. Locke relied on what Bhandar refers to as "fictive time," where he imagined "the premodern and prelegal world of uncultivated, wild lands, inhabited by uncivilized Indians" (Bhandar 2018, 49). He imagined Indigenous populations as a window into the civilisational past—a significant change from earlier accounts that saw Indigenous populations as the remnants of previously great civilisations that had mostly disappeared. When improvement's concerns widened beyond land to include populations and their welfare, the fictive time of allochronism and the subjects rendered backward remained.

Logics of improvement have survived well beyond their colonial origins. The lens of improvement then becomes an important tool that allows us to see and challenge these logics and the denial of coevalness they entail. Improvement emerged and worked co-constitutively in seemingly disparate spaces: from early liberal thinkers' conceptions of property to ideas of "agricultural improvement" that drove dispossessions as varied as the enclosures in England and Scotland and settler colonial law in Palestine (Bhandar 2018). Colonial conquest most generally depended on the difference between the improved (cultivated) lands and the unimproved wastelands in its *terra nullius* doctrines (Bhandar 2018).

Later, the idea of improvement also underpinned the emergence of "development" in international politics in the twentieth century. During the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, improvement emerged as a new focus of colonial government (Allan 2018; Li 2007). It helped shift colonial government from extraction to supposedly benevolent

tutelage. This has a twofold effect that studies of improvement should note. In specific sites, this points to a much longer history of layering improvement schemes and the need for historical contextualisation—a point so well demonstrated in Tania Li's (2007) study of the "will to improve" in Central Sulawesi. While I have done this by pointing to Yugoslav experiments with improvement, other studies can deepen this inquiry by asking about the formation of Yugoslav ideologies of development and progress that were so central to the socialist political orders. More generally, this period also saw development become the main aim of both international organisations such as the League of Nations and states more generally. Bentley Allen (2017) has meticulously traced this history of improvement, which continues to this day through ideas of unending growth. An inquiry into specific improvement schemes and their effects always unfolds on multiple scales.

Improvement, then, is made in the pairing of civilisational thinking with faith in human agency. This belief in the abilities *and* responsibilities of improvers was how many of the people I spoke to in Serbia imagined solutions to their varied, and very real, problems. They either denounced the absence of the state as a source and organiser of improvement or imagined different projects of improvement that would, someday, make Serbia look more like "normal countries in the West." The young people I spoke to also saw themselves as doing improvement: not only in terms of self-betterment, but also in the social, economic, and political terms of creating a new, implicitly more civilised, community—an aim and reasoning they shared with many NFE projects and funders.

This active participation of the subjects of improvement is where I depart most obviously from existing studies on improvement and its many iterations. Improvement is not only a top-down process imagined in government offices, thought up by experts and explored in genealogies. It is also a reality of people living in the many layers of its schemes—not because they have "fallen victim" to an ideology, but because they are active subjects of international politics structured by the same logic. Improvement operates globally on multiple intersecting scales, and always includes a variety of actors as active agents. Even though they are underpinned by the same teleological ideas of progress and history as international interventions, improvement schemes are not constituted by the inside/outside of nation-states, nor are they discrete acts that necessarily (try to) lead to liberal rule. The narratives of expertise and deficiency associated with official improvement schemes not only shape particular projects, but also the modes in which individual subjects are placed in international politics, and their ways of understanding those positions.

The move from intervention to a politics of improvement as a lens for understanding the experiences of people engaged by these diverse projects entails a threefold change, not only in the way we approach our interlocutors, but also in the way we design and conduct research more generally. This re-conceptualisation goes beyond the constitutive limitations of intervention in three ways discussed in Chapter 1: beyond local/international agents, beyond acts in fields of visibility prescribed by interventions themselves, and beyond a fixation upon the success or failure of liberalism as the aim of intervention.

From Specific Acts to Expanded Fields of Visibility

In Chapter 1, I discussed how pre-determined fields of visibility in intervention research are embedded within a wider methodological and analytical erasure of non-Western lives from IR, and how they perpetuate the blind spot of research focussed on "high" politics and urban spaces. The politics of improvement, as a lens, helps to counter this dynamic. Moving beyond pre-determined fields of visibility is not solely an issue of devising new methodological tools for accessing different lifeworlds, or narrating the surpluses of fieldwork. Methodological discussions in IR generally (Aradau and Huysmans 2014), and in the study of interventions specifically (Bliesemann de Guevara and Bøås 2020; Millar 2018; Mac Ginty, Brett, and Vogel 2021), have become increasingly sophisticated. It is now common to reflect on the limitations and surpluses of fieldwork-based approaches (Kušić and Záhora 2020a; Poopuu and van den Berg 2021). Simultaneously, new empirical openings are underway as scholars are moving to new arenas of intervention and its effects. I build onto these two developments to argue that the lens of improvement is helpful for challenging specific fields of visibility: highlighting exclusions immanent in both our concepts and our methodologies.

While this might sound straightforward, such a project requires radical changes to the way we do research, such as recognising that we do not know what matters while we are writing grant applications and developing research designs; allowing both empirical *and* theoretical research to move us into fields beyond intervention; and acknowledging that, even with the best intentions and the most creative methodologies, what is important may still lie beyond what we are able to observe. Even ethnographic methods—often celebrated as giving privileged access to the worlds of our interlocutors—are not enough in themselves. They did not enable coeval engagement with young people navigating NFE in Serbia or with peasants and producers

surviving in the chaotic field of agricultural governance. Coeval engagement requires not only methodological sensitivity, but also empirical and analytical broadening beyond the acts, agents, and aims of international intervention.

In the field of agricultural governance, land policy lies beyond intervention's field of visibility—policy experts have highlighted that it is not a part of EU legislation, casting it firmly as a "national issue" (see Parramore and Webb 2021). Yet it was important for the experiences of my interlocutors. Once I followed the concerns of my interlocutors and expanded my field of visibility to include land, its connection with the dynamics of EU mandated transformation of agricultural governance—marketisation and modernisation—were clear. Two different techniques of improvement—Europeanisation and FDI—work alongside and through similar representations and material conditions. Similarly, unemployment proved to be key for understanding the experiences of young people I spoke with in NFE events. It led me to consider youth who were not present in the workshops I attended, but who are crucial for the larger visions of governing (un) employment in Serbia. In the expanded field of youth unemployment, it was then possible to observe different subjects, different forms of power, and ultimately the heterogeneity of liberalism itself that creates opportunity for some while foreclosing it for others. Analytically, this is a shift into "new concerns and categories" (Go 2016, 179) found in expanded fields of visibility. Within these new fields, there are also subjects that do not fit within the local/international binary.

From Local and International Agents to Translations of Hierarchies

The local/international binary has been discussed and challenged widely in critical scholarship on statebuilding and peacebuilding interventions. In Chapter 1, I highlighted its stubborn survival in ways in which we think of "the local." Focussing on the politics of improvement, rather than intervention narrowly defined, not only allows difference but urges us to conceptualise the many positions we encounter within the local. While decolonial approaches to interventions recognise "the perpetuation of colonial power relations in seemingly benevolent activities" and argue for foregrounding local experiences and "in-country critiques of foreign presence" (Rutazibwa 2019, 66), they also risk missing complex forms of political agency that cannot be easily described as "critiques." Often we are not faced (only) with "in-country *critiques*" (Rutazibwa 2019, 66, emphasis added), but with

in-country *desires* and *hopes* for international presence. This ambivalence is rarely afforded space in critical scholarship on intervention, but it can be uncovered through tracing the translations of hierarchies through which improvement works. I thus suggest replacing the local-international dichotomy with a focus on everyday geopolitical positionings along horizontal and vertical lines. This is a particular "epistemic strategy" endeavouring to "acknowledge the semiperiphery as a specific epistemic standpoint." Doing so requires scholars "deconstruct not only the theoretical universalism of the core, but also the universalism of post-colonial theory" (Blagojević 2009, 55).

As already discussed in Chapter 3, Stef Jansen refers to "everyday geopolitical discourse" as "a routine, non-official mode of representation of one's collective place in the contemporary world" that helps us see how the "geopolitical becomes personal" (2009, 821, 824). This positioning happens on what Orlanda Oband (2016) identifies as horizontal and vertical axes. The horizontal axis refers to a gradation of countries on their levels of Europeanness. It is employed when the ideal of a modern subject is used to diagnose and act upon those lacking peace, democracy, and development. Accordingly, it is a common concern of both IR scholarship and critical studies of Balkanism. The vertical axis, on the other hand, functions *within* societies and "uses notions related to Europeanness to (re)produce hierarchies and exercise exclusions/expulsions of various segments of the [same] population" (Obad 2016, 186). It operates within countries by assigning value to different portions of the same community based on their closeness to European ideals, and it remains only rarely discussed.

On the horizontal axis, Serbia is positioned as simultaneously inferior to Europe and superior to countries further east or south. In my fieldwork, explanations of problems from a wide variety of actors often fixated on local pathologies: failed state policies that produced failing citizens. For example, when discussing unemployment, my interlocutors often spoke about the outdated education system, the unreasonable expectations young people have, and the common lack of both the skill and the will needed to secure a job. In agriculture, peasants were blamed for being old and uneducated, but the state was also guilty of producing an unpredictable governance structure and lacking expertise. In other words, both state structures and individual people in the country were considered *backward* in comparison to European ideals.

Importantly, these images not only structure policy—whether those of intervention projects or the state—but also are used by people in acts of everyday geopolitical positioning. Throughout fieldwork, I was faced with entrenched feelings of inferiority in relation to the imagined West. The most

horrible insults directed at the government and the most deprecating descriptions of segments of the population unable to become "civilised" were not presented to me by foreign NGO workers or employees of the World Bank, but by domestic NGO workers, the liberal youth, and the "modernised right," and were repeated on the streets in the most casual conversations.

Theorising from these self-positionings is a tricky exercise. In Anibal Quijano's (2000, 556) discussion of Latin America, Eurocentric knowledge production becomes a mirror that creates an image of Latin American society and history that is "too partial and distorted," but nevertheless accepted as reality by the people in Latin America. Manuela Boatcă similarly discusses imperial difference in Europe as shaping not only the "socioeconomic organization" of East Europe, but also the "*self*-conceptualisation of its subjects" (2012, 134, emphasis added). Post-colonial scholars like Ashis Nandy (2010) and Frantz Fanon (2008) have delved directly into these subjective dimensions of domination. And scholars in East Europe and the Balkans have similarly reflected on what they refer to as a "self-colonizing tendency" (Kovačević 2008; Gagyi 2016; Blagojević 2009; Kiossev 2011).

While these perspectives usefully highlight the connections between subjectivity and coloniality that structure improvement, it is imperative to avoid treating these (self-)positionings as complete. Such an approach not only is analytically limiting, but also reproduces the omnipotence of Europe—in its ability to remake lifeworlds and mindsets. Alternatively, we can see these contradictory positions as always incomplete acts of everyday geopolitical positioning that helps us to better understand the manifold workings of "Europe" in its peripheries and beyond—an issue I return to in the following section.

At the same time it denigrated the country and the people in it, the same horizontal axis was used to differentiate Serbia from those *more* backward. This happened, for example, when comparing economic indicators to those of African countries and using their similarities to demonstrate Serbian backwardness. While I was shocked to hear someone differentiate Serbia from the "black countries" in which land grabbing is common (Chapter 6), understanding this geopolitical positioning can be aided by connecting it with the literature that explores the reworkings of Orientalist narratives in Southeast Europe. "Nesting Orientalism" explains how difference is used in self-identification not only as inferior to the West, but also as *superior* to the East, which always begins *there*, not *here* (Bakić-Hayden 1995; Bakić-Hayden and Hayden 1992; Razsa and Lindstrom 2004). The same lines that separate "us" from the more developed are employed to distance "us" from the less developed.

While nesting Orientalism was primarily observed in processes within the Balkans and the relations between the newly established post-Yugoslav states, its lessons fit well within the recent literature that adopts a global outlook and challenges the "shocking absence of global colonial awareness" in the Balkans (Bjelić 2018b, 752). For example, historical legacies of Yugoslav non-alignment, self-management, and dissident socialist thought are complicated by discussing the Eurocentric underpinnings of their modernist outlooks (Karkov 2015; Karkov and Valiavicharska 2018; Subotić and Vučetić 2017; Kilibarda 2010). A similar ambiguous position is also present in research on the "Balkan route" as both a racialising and racialised border apparatus where the Balkans states are employed as new "policemen" of Europe (De Genova 2016; Rexhepi 2018).

This literature points out that the Balkans are in an ambiguous position globally: outside of the common categories of the colonisers and the colonised (Baker 2018a, 170–71), and simultaneously "in pact and proximity of Euro-American coloniality" and "its product and defying periphery" (Gržinić, Kancler, and Rexhepi 2020, 18). Engaging local experiences and political practice then requires more than exposing the internalisation of colonial difference as feelings of inadequacy. It necessitates remaining attentive to the ways in which these global entanglements inspire new systems of oppression. This is a challenge that any discussion of local political practice and resistance must take on, but a challenge that cannot be taken on within the local/international binary that currently dominates intervention research and practice.

Finally, similar civilisational hierarchies were used to explain inequalities *within* Serbia. This vertical axis operates within countries and uses individualistic ideas about hard work and entrepreneurship—inspired by global images of backwardness and productivity—to justify why some people are targeted by governmental power to become more competitive and more ambitious, while others are conspicuously silenced. NFE trainers and participants relied on a commonsensical division within Serbia. For example, when a trainer described Serbian society as "schizophrenic" because it was unable to decide whether to accept or reject "EU values," the trainer and others in the classroom were implicitly excluded from this general societal condition (fieldwork journal, March 13, 2016). In discussions we had about faulty education systems and the failed labour subjects they create, young people I spoke to did not consider themselves as damaged as their less successful peers. In agriculture, the difference between producers judged capable of engaging in a truly capitalist production and those expected to vanish from statistics was iterated not only by officials, Serbian or otherwise, but by

producers themselves and the general population. Being "stuck in the past/unwilling to modernise," which supposedly explains the inability to raise production to European levels, refers to both a mentality that refuses change and the material lack of capacity to modernise production.

Hierarchies of local/international, Western/non-Western, and modern/backward have a life beyond the discourses of Western actors: people also use them to find their place in local and global politics. This re-conceptualisation helps empirically and theoretically link hierarchies across multiple scales, showing their co-constitution and paving the way for research that connects global politics with everyday experience. Moving beyond the local-international binary does not mean ignoring the global geopolitical, cultural, and economic hierarchies that stem from colonial and racial differences that underwrite liberal interventionism (Shilliam 2008, 1133). On the contrary, it enables us to better understand these hierarches as we consider their enactment in spaces not limited to those with direct experiences of colonisation and slavery. They exist within other societies as well—as they are constitutive of the global order.

Actually Existing Liberalism

In youth education, some subjects were clearly meant to foster creativity and entrepreneurship, while others were destined for the dual-education track to prepare for work in the many factories brought to Serbia through subsidised FDI. In agriculture, growth was imagined equally through fostering the entrepreneurial spirit of a particular class of farmers, and by the quiet disappearance of many small and semi-subsistence producers and peasants that do not have a place in EU policies oriented towards the "family farm." These subjects also point to different forms of rule. One group of youth is encouraged to dream big and think outside of the box, while another is taught to accept deteriorating labour conditions as the best they can get. One group of producers is encouraged to grow through EU and FAO projects and usher Serbian agriculture (back) into the world market, while another is left unable to lease land and abandoned to disappear. The coexistence of these very different programmes complicates any easy verdict on the liberal or illiberal aims and outcomes of statebuilding and development interventions in Serbia. Treating these political constellations as coeval, rather than just stages along the road of liberalism (with possible setbacks) changes the questions we should be asking: instead of future-oriented questions of transition and becoming, we can also ask what current coeval developments tell us

about liberalism itself.

While intervention techniques that promote entrepreneurship, civil society building, and democracy in Serbia are underlined by liberal ideals, they also constantly fail to accomplish their professed aims. Their failures range from varied forms of resistance to the constraining political economy of youth unemployment in Chapter 4, and to the very authoritarian approach to neoliberalisation of agricultural government addressed in Chapters 5 and 6. However, the fact that some populations are seemingly excluded from liberal ideas or subjected to non-liberal forms of power does not mean that they are somehow *outside* of the liberal project, nor does this undermine the universal claims of that project (Vrasti 2013, 64). "Compromises, fissures, and incoherencies" do not signal the *failure* of liberal programmes, but are the very "condition of their existence" (Lemke 2002, 57).

This conclusion has two implications. First, it once again highlights that liberal interventionism fundamentally depends on its "core contradiction" (Jahn 2007b, 224), discussed in Chapter 1: it is universal in its foundation, but developmental inequalities are a constitutive part of it. Second, it changes the way liberalism as a form of power is understood. In discussions on governmentality, this means not only debating where and how liberalism is possible, but rethinking what liberalism is: an always heterogenous form of power that works through and alongside hierarchies.

Research on the politics of improvement abandons the blueprints of liberalism as an object of desire or critique, tracing "the interweaving and therefore the mutual constitution of liberal and non-liberal social formations" (Rampton and Nadarajah 2017, 6). Any critique of liberal intervention, whether in the form of democracy promotion, development, statebuilding, or peacebuilding, must account for the contradictory processes that simultaneously nurture greater freedom for some and circumscribe it for others. Critiques intent on finding exploitation will be faced with subjects who entrepreneurially embrace liberal freedoms and create pockets of prosperity. In contrast, critiques focused on dispersed government that nurtures freedom will not be able to explain silencing, exploitation, and often outright violence they encounter.

Navigating a Global IR

The concept of the politics of improvement pushes against the conceptual limits of intervention research, but it also contributes to the wider project of globalising, democratising, and changing IR. Through desk work and field-

work, this book has shown a way of approaching historical narratives, scholarly and public debates, and our own positionality in projects of reconstructing subjecthoods missing from IR. I followed Marina Blagojević's insistence on the Balkans as a specific "semiperiphery" able to theorise, instead of its perspectives being "simply incorporated into the already defined theoretical framework, thus silenced even when officially present" (2009, 51).

The emphasis on the epistemic potential of reconstruction, however, can sit uneasily with the political investments that animate projects of reconstruction in the first place. Julian Go, for example, advocates a new sociology that would start from "a concrete *site*, a location, a place, and an immediate context" (2016, 169–70), namely from what he refers to as the subaltern context. Here "Subjectivities are important *not in themselves*, but because they alert us to which dimensions of that context should grab our analytic attention." In other words, "The local site is *merely scaffolding* for moving upward to apprehend larger social formations" (Go 2016, 170, emphasis added).

While providing important defences and highlighting the analytical potential of a novel methodological orientation, such a statement can also be interpreted as reducing people to "mere scaffolding." The problem with this is not just ethico-political—people should be ends in themselves, rather than means to an end—but also methodological. It obscures the fact that the starting point of much of this *analytical* work is inspired precisely by the varied affective, political, and moral attachments to places and people, which are much more than scaffolding. In other words, the analytical potential of different positions is always wedded to an ethico-political commitment to those positions. Our relations—in fieldwork, literature, and our own texts—depend on those investments.

This is not to contradict my own arguments against seeing fieldwork as intimacy and closeness (Chapter 2), but to emphasise the affective and embodied dimensions of analytical development. The questions we ask often come from anger, sadness, anxiety, or a sense of urgency. These feelings do not have to be underpinned by our own experiences (although they often are), nor must they go hand in hand with a commitment to activism (see Shepherd 2018). Rather, they are born out of messy attachments—literal and metaphorical—to these sites. They might serve as scaffolding for larger analytical and epistemological projects, but it is not only the scaffolding that brings us to sit beside out interlocutors as coeval subjects in the first place. I think an impulse towards coeval engagement brings us there.

Working through such engagements in this book changed my expectations of *critique* and ways of writing *Europe*. While the question of criti-

cality has received renewed attention within IR in the last few years (e.g., Conway 2022), intervention scholarship demonstrates well the key critical theory insight that each generation must devise its own tools and objects of critiques. The lens of the politics of improvement invites a critique more attuned to complex everyday positions within global political life, and a critique of Europe that accounts for its power as a symbol in the hands of people excluded from the privilege of "being European."

Different Objects and Venues of Critique

In arguing against the constitutive categories of intervention, which, I contend, obscure more than they illuminate, there is a concern that their elimination will make critique of international intervention more difficult. Most critical scholarship on intervention has focused precisely on the very real power imbalance between the positions of "the local" and "the international" in intervention—the international intervenes in the local without legitimacy, in the wrong ways, and with adverse consequences. This is where intervention has been immensely useful as a concept: it renders visible these inequalities and the effects of projects launched across them. Yet conceptual lenses conceal as well as illuminate. Seeing these processes as part of a politics of improvement and allowing non-Western subjects a coeval and often contradictory political life requires a more difficult venue of critique—one where everyone is in some way implicated, where everyone is incorporated into similar matrices of power, and where there is no "pure" resistance or authenticity that would present an unproblematic alternative. To paraphrase Tania Li (2010, 233), we are faced with a world in which there are plenty of victims, but no easily identifiable villains.

Paying attention to the politics of improvement in Serbia brings to the fore less spectacular embodiments of international engagement with difference: there are no more bombings in Serbia, there are no (direct) challenges to sovereignty, there are no white SUVs or secured international zones. What we see instead is a more banal, but vastly more pervasive, process. We see liberalism as a lived reality, layered upon Yugoslav experiments with markets, corrupt transition, and economic ideals promoted and dictated by international financial institutions. We see the roles of the state, civil society, and individuals constantly renegotiated through projects that cannot be described as purely local or international. We see complex hierarchies that position individuals within global geopolitics and local communities simultaneously, and which aim at nothing less than normalising the level of hope

that each individual is entitled to.

These processes are more difficult to represent, study, and critique. Scholarly attention, akin to that of the media, often depends on spectacular instances of dispossession. People navigating unemployment or small agricultural producers deciding that production is not worth it anymore are not broadcast on television, are not talked about in activist meetings, and do not fill the pages of IR textbooks. In late "transition" the violence is slower and its roots more difficult to untangle.[2] In this context, researchers looking for political relevance are less likely to find allies (see Vorbrugg 2022). "Resistance" does not lend itself as an epistemological site or an unproblematic political ally. What exactly people resist, and how, is contextual and always both already shaped by the forces being resisted and charged with the possibility of radical change.

As critics of development, peacebuilding, or democracy promotion, we researchers can forget too easily that the recipients of such projects, even though they are silenced and at times actively exploited in these endeavours, often actually *want* development, peace, and democracy. While these liberal ideals are easy to unpack theoretically, once faced with real life it is much harder to argue against wanting to end war, improve living conditions, build a more just government, or advocate respect for human rights. Instead of wanting less intervention and an escape from these projects, subjects I encountered were concerned with being seen by both international agencies and the Serbian state. The meaning of the state in these feelings of disappointment is a specific political analysis in itself: citizens in the Yugoslav region draw on the socialist past to imagine a state willing and able to care, and "articulate demands in terms of the imaginaries and ethics of economic sociality and social arrangements of 'the past'" (Greenberg and Spasić 2017, 319). It is a paradoxical critique of the last thirty years whereby "the 'state' is seen as both the biggest source of corruption and crisis and the only place from which some new, functioning social and moral order can be made" (Rajković 2017, 34; see also Spasić and Birešev 2012).

Learning from, rather than "giving voice" to, the subjects targeted by interventions does not entail dismissing such aspirations as accidental products of modernity. It is more productive to explore how the things desired come to be considered foreign, and how the paths to their achievement are obstructed by global and local circumstances. The object of our critique thus

2. This is a reference to Rob Nixon's (2011) work on slow violence. Our conceptions of "slow," however, differ, as he speaks about longer biological processes that destroy the environment in unspectacular ways.

becomes a more subtle closure of political imaginations, and the venues of critique become more difficult to navigate. Instead of pointing to disjunctures through which we are used to conceptualising change and our critique of it, the politics of improvement points to continuity. Instead of difference and the separation of units, it points to coevalness. A humble critique then emerges as it navigates the experiences of everyday people and the structures that make them, but which is also piercing as it avoids the straightforward divisions between the "good" and "bad." It sees that the will to govern is inevitable, but as Li (2007, 234) adds, it also creates space to examine and challenge the hierarchies of trusteeship that this will implies.

A Different Account of Europe and Eurocentrism

A conceptual shift from intervention to the politics of improvement also produced a different account of Europe and Eurocentrism in this book. A lot has been written about the power of Europe globally, and about the peculiar position of the Balkans within global coloniality. My work in non-formal youth education and agricultural modernisation demonstrates that programmes that seek to build peace, development, and democracy not only depend on shaping subjects' desires to fit the neoliberalisation of life, but also cast those desires as always already liberal and foreign. This is the creation of Europe as a symbolic ideal, a point of reference where goodness naturally begins and resides. Treating concepts like peace and development as occurring endogenously in Europe and then "spreading" globally is fundamentally Eurocentric (see Bhambra 2007). Such understandings reify these phenomena as products of the West and once again ignore coevalness. For example, the entire region of East Europe was diagnosed as lacking civil society, even though civil society contributed immensely to the end of communism in many East European countries. More practically, agricultural associations are now promoted in Serbia as something developed by the World Bank and the FAO, even though cooperatives were a founding pillar of Yugoslav agriculture—something that I heard again and again in tales of disbelief in interviews.

The symbolic power of Europe also shapes ways in which solutions to very real problems are imagined. There are many oppressions, exclusions, and exploitations, both visible and invisible, in Serbia. Many rightfully decry the abhorrent treatment of Roma communities, the corrupt business deals, the subhuman treatment of workers that wear diapers because they are not allowed bathroom breaks. We hear about the racist treatment of people

on the move and the ongoing violence and discrimination against Albanian and Kosovar Muslims. Yet these critics often turn their gaze to Europe as a solution—as an entity both endowed with and dispensing goodness. The same Europe that gave birth to the racial hierarchies familiar to us today is expected to teach others how not to be racist. The same Europe on whose shores tens of thousands are left to die every year is expected to teach compassion. The same Europe that fuelled the development of capitalism with its colonial conquest and genocide is expected to teach law and benevolence.

I do not want to reinscribe agency once again to Europe, nor do I aim to point to faulty EU policies. I want to highlight the devastating effect that the idea of Europe as a site of goodness has for political imaginaries. This is the Europe that is imagined by youth when they condemn the Serbian educational system. This is the Europe that is invoked when dreaming about huge farms that are worked by drones instead of people, a Europe that monopolises progressive thought and ends experiments before they can begin. This is the Europe that must be tackled as we embark on projects of engaging with non-Western subjectivities, a Europe that hides its own coeval histories of development and dispossession and its own heterogeneous character of rule in slow, banal, and barely noticeable ways. A project of a global, provincialised, or democratised scholarship thus cannot end at writing different stories about "non-Western" places, but also needs to write a different story of Europe: one that takes seriously the power implied in Europe as a symbol, and the many lines that are drawn and solidarities that are blocked when the argument that "this is Europe" becomes the only possible defence.

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Understanding improvement requires critique that can change scale, oscillate between theory and the field, and extend beyond both the structures and the experiences that we are presented with. This book thus advocates a less conclusive, yet more ambitious, effort to think big while practicing humility. It is less conclusive because it does not provide diagnoses of success or failure, nor recipes for doing things better in the short term. Nevertheless, it is more ambitious because it challenges us to think things that are usually kept separate together—global hierarchies, international politics, and everyday experiences. I do not want to argue that researchers in Serbia need to stop studying statebuilding and investigate land politics and youth unemployment instead, but I claim that the way we think about intervention in IR is at odds with treating people living the consequences of those interventions as coeval political subjects. My own solution, to look beyond

and outside intervention, is one way of dealing with this. Other solutions will be diverse and surely exciting.

Perhaps the biggest struggle of my own research practice has been the paradoxical realisation that I also started by naively looking for "intervention." Yet the tensions between the epistemological and theoretical limitations of intervention, and the politics of improvement I was faced with, highlight the potential of coeval engagement. Scrutinising the logics, practices, and effects of improvement does not imply "purer" or "better" knowledge. Paradoxically, I hope it motivates us to think about the frameworks needed to explain those experiences, while remaining humble enough to be excited by the prospect of those same frameworks being challenged.

Appendix

Fieldwork Tactics

In my understanding of ethnography elaborated in Chapter 2, I distinguish between anthropology as a discipline usually associated with ethnography, ethnography as a methodological orientation, and participant observation as one ethnographic tactic of inquiry (Hockey and Forsey 2012, 72). This definition allows me to move away from understanding ethnography as a tactic of inquiry with standards that are never achieved—whether those are the expectation of a twelve-month stay or complete immersion and participation. Nowadays, it is recognised that the grounding myths of anthropological fieldwork survive only as ideals: never accomplished but profoundly shaping knowledge production and researchers' subjectivities (Hanson and Richards 2019; Kušić and Záhora 2020a). Most of our ethnographies are dispersed and multi-sited and draw on a spate of methods such as ethnographic interviews, impromptu focus groups, and our own everyday observations (Marcus 1995; Feldman 2011; Stepputat and Larsen 2015). We live in an explicit era of "patchwork ethnography" (Günel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020).

My own ethnographic practice was similarly dispersed and multi-sited. The majority of my fieldwork took place in Serbia in 2016, where I spent circa five months in Belgrade and five in Novi Sad. While some events and interviews took place outside of Serbia (e.g., the workshop in Istanbul that opens the introduction, an interview with a member of the Croatian EU negotiations team working on agriculture in Zagreb, and the food sovereignty meeting in Cluj, Romania), the majority of my time was spent in Serbia. While staying in Novi Sad, I also travelled around Vojvodina for interviews and events, as the region is the agricultural centre of Serbia. Since 2016, I have visited Serbia on short trips, especially in the field of agricul-

tural and land policy, where I have continued to do research beyond this project (e.g., Kušić and Lazić 2022). This short appendix complements Chapter 2 and presents the more technical aspects of my research practice: access, ethics procedures, and interview participants and protocols.

Access

While I had initially planned to research the two policy sites simultaneously, accessing agricultural policy in Belgrade proved difficult (and perhaps unsurprisingly so, many have chuckled at my idea of studying agriculture in the capital). So, while staying in Belgrade I focused primarily on non-formal youth education, and I investigated agricultural policy while in Novi Sad. Of course, the two often mixed, and I used both interview and event opportunities during the whole year, but a practical division was useful. In Chapter 2, I presented the different tactics I used. My choice of tactics depended not only on methodological appropriateness, but also on issues that are most often discussed under the umbrella term "access." The tactics varied between the two policy areas under investigation—non-formal youth education and agricultural governance—and within them. They changed based on issues of access (what I could approach and when), and in relation to the questions that I was asking as my research was developing.

My fieldwork in NFE consisted of attending a number of courses, seminars, and lectures. I started with the Youth for Peace week presented in the introduction. I attended two Erasmus+ Youth in Action trainings organised in Serbia; a semester of a political school for youth active in right and centre-right parties funded by a German political foundation and implemented by a Serbian NGO; a seven-week course on transitional justice in Belgrade; lectures in other courses taking place in Belgrade; and numerous public lectures with educational goals. These events were participatory, and they exposed me to many people, life stories, and experiences. Without the pressure of the usual formal invitation and expectations associated with focus groups, these meetings were data rich, as we discussed politics, history, and current events, and they led to numerous follow-up meetings and allowed me to conduct interviews as part of participant observation (see Skinner 2012, 35).

I also conducted in-depth interviews with trainers and participants of non-formal education courses; I interviewed people who worked in the funding organisations and people who were active in the field of NFE from the early 1990s; and I gathered policy documents produced by the state, donors, and civil society organisations. This allowed me to gain familiar-

ity even with courses that I did not attend—through getting to know their reputation or speaking with people who had attended them.

In the field of agriculture, my "participation" was more limited. With policymakers, I tried to attend the trainings organised for employees of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy, but my queries were promptly silenced with technical reports. In interviews, I was often presented with well-rehearsed technocratic explanations and scripts. While providing an important insight into dominant narratives that guide policies in Serbian agriculture, these interviews provided little in terms of personal experiences that I was interested in. I also considered spending time with a specific group of producers. This, however, seemed unsuitable for the myriad of processes that I was interested in—staying within one family, I would not have had the same access to different stories I had when I attended educational events.

I thus attended press conferences and public events and followed mainstream and social media that relates to agriculture in Serbia. Additionally, I travelled to Romania as a part of the Serbian delegation to the Nyéléni European Food Sovereignty Forum. This allowed me to spend time with people who see themselves as actors in Serbian agriculture and opened new networks. With time, I felt I became at least a bit of a part of the community of people broadly interested in agriculture in Serbia. I received invites to events and developed working relationships that "kept me in the loop."

When it comes to issues of access, I cannot overemphasise the support from friends (and their families!), colleagues, and acquaintances that were all interested in my research and helped me approach organisations and people. This support both enabled and shaped my research in Serbia, so, in addition to acknowledging it at the start of the book, I also want to explicitly place it here as a central piece of my methodology.

Ethics (Boards) and Consent

The ethics approval for the project was provided by the Aberystwyth University Ethics Officer. While I agree with those who argue that ethics boards are only a small part of grappling with doing ethical research, the institutional process is also key in setting baseline standards and identifying themes and issues that need additional attention. I want to note a few "complicating" features of my own research practice. The individual consent forms that the Aberystwyth ethics procedures relied on were complicated in group settings, where getting all the participants to sign the forms would have been impractical. Instead, and in conversations with the Aberystwyth University Ethics

Officer, I cleared my participation with the organisers of the workshops and presented myself and the project to the group at the start of the session. While this was often embarrassing for me, it allowed my participants to ask me questions in a manner similar to my asking them questions in follow-up interviews. In these groups, people were more likely to ask for more details: about my funding, my publication plans, themes, and questions, and even about my plans for returning to the region after completing my degree.

When I started looking into the details of land policy, many of my interviewees were afraid of leaving a paper trail (see Chapter 6 for some of the contentious politics unfolding in the area). I had to adjust my procedures, and in conversation with colleagues and the Aberystwyth University Ethics Officer started following the oral consent guidelines from the Central University Research Ethics Committee at University of Oxford with the approval of the Aberystwyth University Ethics Officer. This ensured that ethical guidelines were followed while allowing my participants to feel safer. These interviews were also mostly not recorded, but I took extensive notes during and after the interview. Additionally, I have anonymised all participants. While some explicitly stated that they would not mind their name appearing in publications, I have decided that Global Data Protection Regulation and ethics guidelines are better served by anonymisation, while specific names would not add substance to my analytical work.

Interview Participants and Protocols

As already mentioned, approaching the two fields was quite different. In non-formal youth education, my participation was relatively easy: I would apply to courses and interview participants, trainers, and funders, always snowballing from recommendations they had. In agricultural policy, my access was more difficult: it required a substantial persistence and some serendipity. In researching policymakers in Belgrade, a chance encounter with an EU negotiation team member in an NFE event opened many doors. In Novi Sad, an agricultural journalist provided invaluable advice and contacts. In addition to interviewing producers who were recommended by experts, I also approached others through friends and acquaintances in Vojvodina. This was especially important as I was often recommended "good examples" who were successful and therefore could not offer as much insight into the struggles of smaller producers.

In addition to participating in events, I conducted circa sixty-seven interviews—some of the interviews included multiple sessions, while oth-

ers included multiple people. As already explained, because my participant observation was more limited in agricultural policy, I conducted more interviews there (thirty-eight in total in the main part of my fieldwork, with additional interviews conducted in 2021). These included journalists, agricultural experts and consultants, local officials in areas where big investments were happening, EU officials, activist and civil society members, and mid-size and small producers. In non-formal youth education, I conducted twenty-nine interviews. These included participants, trainers, people working in donor organisations, and civil society organisations working in the area of NFE.

These were all informal or semi-structured interviews that depended heavily on context. With experts and civil servants, it was more difficult to achieve a conversing "flow"—in those interviews, I prepared detailed questions about processes I was interested in. For the majority of interviews, my protocols depended on a few set themes that I would approach through biographical questions—starting from how/why the person was there (whether in NFE, in agriculture, or working in an NGO) and then moving to ask about specific experiences and opinions. Later in interviews, I also included questions on "what should happen"—this helped me understand better what people saw as problems and how they imagined solutions.

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